VIDEOGAME CULTURE

NOVEMBER 2005



NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOF[T] ... COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONL[INE]

GAME BOY MICRO
Nintendo's shrink ray attempts to revitalise the pocket rocket

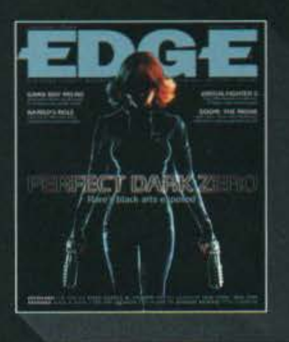
KAMEO'S ROLE
From GC to 360: the story behind Rare's animal actioner

VIRTUA FIGHTE[R]
Plus After Burner and the of Sega's new coin-op

DOOM: THE MOV[IE]
And – yes – every other Hollyw attempt to capture gaming's gl

PERFECT DARK ZERO
Rare's black arts exposed

PREVIEWED THE WITCHER **ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION** RATCHET: GLADIATOR **TRUE CRIME: NEW Y**
REVIEWED BLACK & WHITE 2 **FAR CRY INSTINCTS** CASTLEVANIA DS **BURNOUT REVENGE** TOTAL OVERD



What must it be like to be a part of the development studio that created *GoldenEye*, a game so thorough in its brilliance that even today, eight long years since its release on what is now endearingly clunky technology, some fans refer to it as the best firstperson shooter ever made?

It's not pressure that seems to play on the minds of the team behind this month's cover game, *Perfect Dark Zero* – at least not outwardly, when you talk to them. Instead they seem focused on simply making it the best it can be and have it stand on its own to be judged.

But even doing that isn't a small order – not when the game has to be finished in parallel with the completion of its host hardware for a worldwide launch in November. Rare has only recently taken delivery of final Xbox 360 devkits, so only recently has it actually had a concrete understanding of what can and cannot be achieved on it (and even now not everything has been locked down). Not such an issue when your design brief is limited to, say, sketching out a new type of puzzle game, but surely a source of sleepless night after sleepless night when what you're trying to do is not only produce a firstperson shooter, but actually push forward this most competitive of genres. See how Rare is coping on p46.

And then take a look at the company's other big Xbox 360 project, *Kameo: Elements Of Power*, on p54. In many ways this game wears its accomplishments more overtly than *PDZ* does, but that is not to say that its development, too, hasn't been subject to false starts, changes in direction and more besides.

But Rare seems confident. It must be, after all, to be flinging open its doors like this after so many years of keeping them firmly shut.





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Every month

EDGE

EDITORIAL
Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
Edge website www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor
Margaret Robertson deputy editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Duncan Harris writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Michael French online editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Steven Bailey, Brick Bardo, Mr Biffo, Brandon Boyer, Mark Green, Tim Guest, Jon Jordan, Andy Krouwel, Simon Parkin, Gary Penn, Jim Rossignol, Joao Diniz Sanches, Ben Schroder, Mark Walbank, Oliver Welsh, Steve Williams

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PRODUCTION
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer
Viv Turner senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Kim Brown marketing executive

CIRCULATION
Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager

ADVERTISING
Jayne Caple advertising director
Clare Williamson head of sales
Darren Gratton advertising manager
Richard Sturgess recruitment advertising
Ryan Ferguson online ad manager
Stuart Harris classified
Advertising phone 01225 442244

PUBLISHING
Matthew Pierce publisher
Ben Payne product manager
Simon Wear international licensing director

SUBSCRIPTIONS & DISTRIBUTION
Edge,
Future Publishing Ltd,
FREEPOST RLSC-SXSE-SKKT
Unit 4, Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, Leicestershire,
LE16 PEF
Email: games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
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SENIOR MANAGEMENT
Roger Parry non-executive chairman
Greg Ingham chief executive
John Bowman group finance director

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"You know, Gary, for the first time in my life, I don't feel like a total dick"





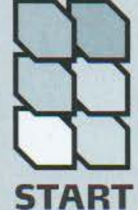
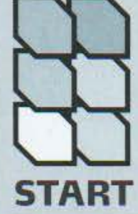
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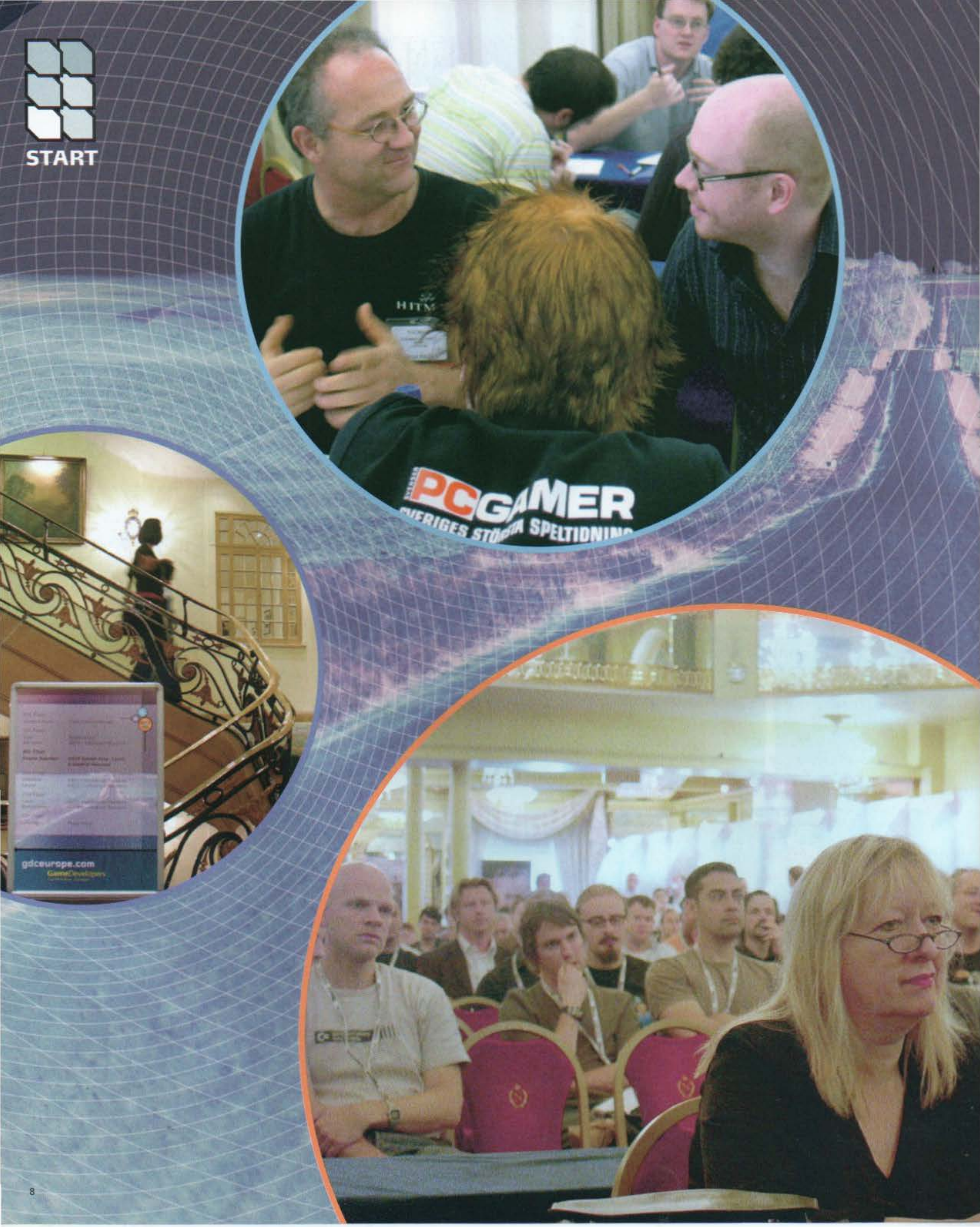
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EVENT

Next-gen is the agenda at GDCE

London plays host to the Euro leg of the Game Developer Conference, where talk is PS3/360

The Game Developer Conferences are designed to be at the cutting edge of a cutting edge industry – software developers and hardware providers coming together to think big and talk technical. What's on their minds won't be in the public's living rooms for another two or three years: even at £600 for an all-access Giga-Pass, the Game Developer Conference Europe represents a pretty cheap form of time travel.

It's a factor that made this year's setting all the more incongruous, the chandeliers and ormolu of London's grandiose Café Royal at odds with talk of lighting algorithms and facial animation pipelines. The Victorian opulence was even sufficient to produce a faint flicker of awe from some American speakers: there couldn't have been a stronger contrast with the neutral, modernist halls of the GDC's current San Francisco home, the Moscone Center.

That contrast was important, however, as it symbolises the biggest challenge facing the GDCE: how does it mark out its identity as a worthwhile event in its own right, and avoid the risk of being a parochial poor relation to the might of the main GDC? That event is now enormous – a key part of the calendar for all sections of the industry, pulling together hundreds of speakers and thousands of delegates from all over the world. It makes the event a self-sustaining system; what attracts people to attend is the people it attracts to attend – a chance to hear from and mix with industry leaders and specialists in your own field. With the kind of critical mass that GDC produces how can a smaller event hope to compete? And, if it can attract the speakers and tackle the subjects that the bigger conference offers, what's to stop it being a simple re-run?

"What I wanted to avoid was just copying over the US event: that wouldn't be fair, that wouldn't resonate – it would be almost insulting. I wanted to give Europe the best possible GDCE I could deliver"

These are issues **Jamil Moledina**, the conference director of both GDC and GDCE, is all too aware of. For all of GDCE's smaller size – a few dozen sessions and hundreds of attendees – he argues that it brings its own benefits: "There is still a level of intimacy at all the GDC events, and GDCE does that extremely well. There is a heightened sense of confidentiality that is really healthy for an event like this – there's a feeling of openness which is amazing and refreshing." This frankness was certainly apparent at this year's conference. It may not be an event of big announcements and dramatic reveals, but there's a slight confessional tone to many of the sessions: a steady stream of tales of crunch-induced cock-ups and botched bug fixes which served mostly to underline just how enormous and unforgiving the process of game development has become.

Moledina is also confident that GDCE can deliver unique content. "What I wanted to avoid was just copying over the US event: that wouldn't be fair, that wouldn't resonate – it would be almost insulting. I wanted to give Europe the best possible GDCE I could deliver." His first goal was to create locally relevant content: "I see GDC as the world's leading game creation event that is populated by speakers with inspirational presentations which are mostly locally produced – from the San Francisco Bay area or the US in general, and here, six months down the line, we have another worldwide game developers event which is locally populated by speakers of the same calibre. That's what I was going for here." And, certainly, hearing Bizarre



The conference closed with a panel Q&A, which was dominated by Jason Kingsley from Rebellion, and whose invigorating discussion on key issues like staff recruitment problems and rising development costs was occasionally drowned out by the chink of Epic's free beer


Keita Takehashi, the maker of *Katamari Damacy*, was unquestionably star of the show. However, his light-hearted approach belied his deeply critical comments on the industry



Gong get

Develop Awards reward developers

Running alongside the GDCE were the third Develop Industry Excellence Awards, whose panel of 50 videogame professionals vote for the studios and developers which keep Europe at the forefront of the industry. The heavyweight awards were won by Creative Assembly (the Grand Prix Award) and David Braben (Development Legend), but it was Traveller's Tales which stole the show, winning awards for the most improved studio, the independent developer and the best use of a licence for the triumpant *Lego Star Wars*.


The Games Mash-Up – designing games for your granny – was won by Takehashi's gloriously preposterous design for an AI-controlled, wifi-connected talking cat toy, which would cajole demotivated grandmothers into making soup and new friends





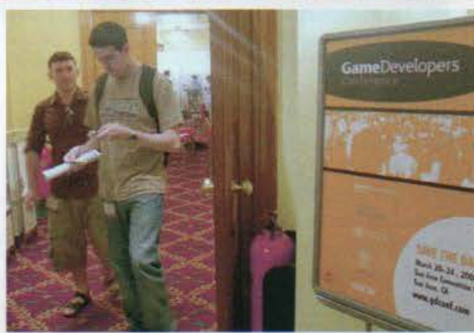
GME face

Another year, another new acronym

A new component of London's gaming summer was Games Market Europe, held at the Business Design Centre. Deliberately lower-key, to banish memories of some of ECTS's more vulgar excesses, it was somewhat a victim of its own success, with many attendees reportedly a little underwhelmed. Nonetheless, it was effective in its intention of bringing together the infrastructure of the European videogame industry in an appropriately businesslike environment. Now the challenge is to see if it can return next year: sustainability is what UK events need the most.




Jamil Moledina, conference director of both GDC and GDCE, took over the role last year, after serving as managing editor on Game Developer magazine, bringing with him many useful contacts and an astute understanding of the issues facing the industry



Ian Baverstock, head of Kuju, led the TIGA session which tackled the currently painful issue of how to safeguard independent development

Creations' Sarah Chudley talk about how to integrate marketing into the game design process, Paulina Bozek outlining the development of the *SingStar* project or Dave Burrows discuss how Sony Liverpool implemented the game-sharing functions within *Wipeout Pure* provided a local take on internationally relevant issues.

However, videogaming is an industry that long ago became too global for this approach to significantly alter the content of GDCE: these weren't discussions of problems and opportunities facing European developers, they were discussions geared towards all developers, most of whom happened to be working on this side of the Atlantic. What made for a bigger contrast was the time shift. For Moledina, the six-month gap between the two events provided an opportunity "to tell an increasingly detailed story about next-generation development. I wasn't able, in March, to secure a keynote from Sony that delivered substantially on next-gen content. It didn't suit their timetable then – it did now."

And it suited them to deliver that content in a very GDCE way – a relaxed Q&A between Moledina and **Phil Harrison**, now speaking from his perspective as executive vice president of development at SCEE, which touched on the issues which dominate next-gen debates: will Sony's tools be better for PS3 than they were for PS2, will PS2 be abandoned too quickly, will PS3 development be prohibitively expensive? Harrison was both assured and reassuring on all issues, pointing to the familiarity of many of the Nvidia tools and the acquisition of SN Systems to allay development difficulty fears, the enduring lifespan of the original PlayStation to give confidence to those still working on PS2, and dismissing as 'doomsayers' those who suggested that the cost of next-gen development could cripple the industry. His charm and confidence are always persuasive, but some of his claims, particularly that "writing for PS3 – at this stage – should be comparatively cheaper" than developing for PS2 at the same stage in its lifecycle, clashed with other perspectives at the conference.

Some of Harrison's claims, particularly that "writing for PS3 – at this stage – should be comparitively cheaper" than developing for PS2 at the same stage in its lifecycle, clashed with other perspectives at the conference

Chris Pickford and Gareth Wilson, from the *Project Gotham Racing 3* team, were frank in their discussion of developing a next-gen launch title. "Everything is 1,000 times more complicated" was their line, warning that "next-gen will catch you off guard" if you don't overhaul everything from your server space to your playtesting procedures. The conference ended with a wide-ranging State Of The Studio panel – lubricated by Epic's gift of free beer – which was dominated by concerns about the cost of next-gen development, with Rebellion's Jason Kingsley warning that the one month to create a hero character last generation had become six to nine months for next-gen. It was clear that dealing with the increased cost and scale of developing for new hardware will dominate developer gatherings for months to come.

But if next-gen worries are the subject which will top the agenda for next year's conferences, the name that will dominate the



Microsoft was heavily involved at the event, and a pep talk from Chris Satchell, general manager of the Game Developer Group, was well received



Phil Harrison opened the conference with a relaxed and confident Q&A session, clearly at ease in a roomful of developers which must have included many old colleagues and current collaborators



conversations in the corridors is Namco's Keita Takehashi. Following on from his rapturously received account of the genesis of *Katamari Damacy* at GDC in March, Takehashi took up the tale of the sequel for his GDCE keynote. By turns charmingly self-effacing and bullishly challenging, it's a testament to the development community's adoration for his games that it could respond so warmly to his almost out-of-hand dismissal of almost every other game ever made. If his keynote proved anything it was how rarely the industry gets to hear voices like his: a real gaming outsider with a real passion for the games he makes. Figuring out how to attract more creators of his calibre will likely be the focus of events in the future.

Nonetheless, the warmth of that keynote was due partly to the fact that it brought all attendees together – something that, inevitably, the main GDC can never accomplish. And a warm atmosphere is not just a pleasant bonus at events like these. Moledina is aggressive in his pursuit of fertile networking ground: "It is something I pay extreme attention to encouraging at these events – so much of this business happens that way." In the end, it may be on that front that GDCE proves its worth. If nothing else, it's clear that no one, not even Mark Rein, could have bought everyone in the Moscone Centre's halls a bottle of beer to smooth the last session of the conference. Could there be any greater guarantee of professional goodwill?



Before the main conference, Ernest Adams ran his popular, day-long Fundamentals Of Game Design course, whose workshops enabled a wide variety of attendees to examine together the process of designing a game blueprint

EVENT

Sega shines at JAMMA

After all those Private Show hints, the coin-op giant makes a public show of its step into the next arcade generation


A new *After Burner* sequel was for many a highlight at the JAMMA event, although Sega has not yet shown the hydraulic system that will presumably back it up

Recent years' JAMMA shows have been marked by an air of quiet optimism or quiet resignation, depending on the observer. All the easier, then, for the 2005 show's series of big-name announcements – largely from a revitalised, ambitious Sega arcade division – to be one of the better arcade events in recent Japanese memory.

It certainly helped that the Makuhari Messe convention centre was charged with the buzz of new hardware again, as Sega's PC-based Lindbergh made its stage debut. Owing more to the Xbox-friendly Chihiro than the nostalgic Naomi, Sega explained that its work-in-progress Naomi 3 had simply fallen behind advances in PC technology, risking being rendered obsolete before it even reached the arcades. Its successor's make-up was decided upon for two reasons: chiefly to provide the raw power to drive a revival of Sega's traditional arcade business, but also for ease of porting to next-generation consoles.

With details on the PS3 still scarce at the time of the Lindbergh's inception, it was built towards a best-guess Xbox 360 specification, using a DirectX environment – considered by many Japanese arcade developers as the easiest to work with. Though the 360's final composition differed from Sega's estimation, using PowerPC and ATI components compared to the Lindbergh's Pentium and Nvidia parts, Sega feels its new board is still angled well for multiplatform ports, with 360 conversions not presenting any major obstacle thanks to the shared use of DirectX.

Sega's primary aim, though, is to recapture the arcade videogame market, with an undisclosed 'large number' of Lindbergh games in development. A handful were present at the show, ranging from a brand-new title from Yu Suzuki, *Psy-Phi*, through new instalments of popular franchises such as *Virtua Fighter*, *Virtua Tennis* and *House Of The Dead*, to a reprise of *After Burner*, some 18 years on. It's a selection obviously intended to demonstrate the breadth of creative material Sega can draw upon, as well as the confidence that produced them to begin with.

Sega's primary aim is to recapture the arcade market, with an undisclosed 'large number' of Lindbergh games in development

Even the Atomiswave was in rude health, confirmed to be the new entry-level hardware for Sega's arcade efforts and defying predictions of discontinuation. The Dreamcast-based board's two new titles, *Metal Slug 6* and a completely original *Hokuto no Ken* (*Fist Of The North Star*) high-resolution 2D fighter, both enjoyed brisk business with arcade operators. As was indicated at Sega's July Private Show, support will still be provided for smaller developers using the discontinued Naomi, with G.rev's new shooter *Under Defeat* again playable and attracting lengthy queues.

Ironically, Sega's new arcade dynamism has not been funded by the hardcore audience who have clamoured for it, but rather by the runaway casual successes of *Mushiking* and *Love & Berry* (see **E**150). These two titles now provide the main source of revenue for the company, with *L&B* successfully zeroed in on a female audience immune to *Mushiking*'s insectoid charms. Sega also feels it has a greater potential for export, but used the JAMMA show to hedge its bets with *Kyoryu King* (*King Of The Dinosaurs*), which looks like a cannily judged global tug at young boys' pockets.



Sega's *Kyoryu King* (*King Of The Dinosaurs*) follows the company's massively successful *Mushiking* and *Love & Berry* in setting about attracting younger arcade-goers



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Anyone who's ever had a Game Boy cart sent in the post knows that the first and inevitable casualty is the game's cardboard box. Legions of crushed corners and caved-in flimsy fronts render the boxes undisplayable and doomed to collapsed storage, if not the nearest wastebasket, despite the spine's multilingual oversized warning to please retain the packaging. Enter Snackbar Games' GBA DS Cover Project, a community effort to scan and convert the entire Game Boy library to DS-formatted inserts. Combined with Nintendo's as-yet-inexplicable inclusion of a GBA cart holder in the DS clamshell (and online sales of the boxes in bulk $7 (£4) for ten at store.nintendo.com), a colour printer and a rainy weekend are all that's standing between a cluttered collection of cartridges and a tidy display.

Site:
The GBA DS Cover Project
URL:
www.snackbar-games.com/gbacovers.php







It was also apparent that Sega hasn't lost its ability to set arcade trends: where in previous shows arcade developers were competing to bring the most advanced network titles to market, now the fight has moved into the children's sector. Nearly all companies had their own *Mushiking* clones, few offering any real difference other than which popular licence was used as a façade. According to operators, though, the *Mushiking* generation has little interest in other offerings.

As if anticipating a show in the shadow of Sega's announcements, other companies had a reserved presence. Capcom's line-up, despite a coincidentally timed *Street Fighter 4* rumour, still relied on medal games and toy crossovers. One arcade game was announced – *War Of The Grail*, a mass-battle title with a customisable character – but was present only in the briefest of teasers.

Taito, after such an aggressive display of Type X titles at the AOU show, had little to present. Many attendees were hoping Treasure's Type X title would be shown, but shooter fans would have to look elsewhere, to indie showings of *Under Defeat* and Milestone's *Rajirugi*, or Cave's *Espgaluda* sequel.

Banpresto, meanwhile, demonstrated that the cabinet complexity arms-race mentality can still draw the crowds, with a networked *Gundam* title using Namco's 180-degree screened POD, or Panoramic Optical Display technology (prototyped several years ago as the more eccentric ORBS, Over Reality Booster System). Its other star draw was a less expensive endeavour: the first showing of a new Dragon Ball Z 3D fighter overseen by former Capcom producer Noritaka Funamizu.

After a run of more-tell-than-show events, the line-ups at the last AOU (see **E**148) and this JAMMA indicate that the PC may yet prove the unlikely saviour of the arcade videogame. It's too early to predict the effect that Sega's strengthened return will have within the industry or on the arcade floors – but you can't help but feel that even the competition are glad that the company is back.





A Sega Japan spokesman previously informed us that Lindbergh was Xbox 360-based, but it turns out to be a more conventional PC architecture running a P4 CPU at 3GHz and an Nvidia graphics part. Lindbergh *Virtua Fighter 5* (above). *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection* (top)

Newswire



IGN crosses over

Having filed for an initial public offering in July, gaming conglomerate IGN Entertainment signed an agreement this month to be bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp for a reported $650 million. Alongside the IGN network of websites, the multimedia giant will also inherit sites such as GameSpy, File Planet, Team Xbox, Game Stats and movie review nexus Rotten Tomatoes. The IGN network's accumulated losses at the end of March totalled $23.3 million, attributed to common stock holders, but the acquisition means that its subsequent IPO request no longer stands. News Corp will assimilate it into its Fox Interactive Media unit, a Los Angeles-based operation that manages all of the company's online assets.

Something old, some things new

If arcades are to attract new customers, you wouldn't really know it from these JAMMA titles

PSY-PHI



MANUFACTURER SEGA
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
RELEASE Q1 2006

Sega's second playable Lindbergh title following *House Of The Dead 4*, and the first original Yu Suzuki-developed arcade game in several years, at a glance *Psy-Phi* recalls Taito's *Psychic Force*. However, the similarities end with a hands-on – literally, as the game is controlled by touchscreen.

Tabs in the screen's corners are used for 360-degree movement in the arena. To attack an enemy, the player touches their adversary, and combining touch and movement performs different attacks: length and pressure of touch also affects certain actions, such as charged shots. Other moves are based on timing, such as last-minute dodges, or a special attack indicated by the split-second flash of a symbol that must be traced in sequence.

METAL SLUG 6



MANUFACTURER SEGA
DEVELOPER SNK PLAYMORE
RELEASE 2006

The sixth *Slug* may not have shaken off its Neo-Geo resolution, but the extra power afforded by the Atomiswave hasn't gone untapped. The first stage alone features a convoy passing by on stilt-like robotic legs, zooming the action out to dwarf the heroes and take in the whole of the carnage.

It remains to be seen how fans of previous games' purity will take to *MS6*'s more complex setup, featuring stockpileable weapons that can be switched at will, a 'Rush Blaster System' score multiplier, and a special action modifier button for character-specific weapon or close-combat moves. The latter should be put through its paces by the surprise drafting of Clark and Ralf from *The King Of Fighters*.

HOKUTO NO KEN



MANUFACTURER SEGA
DEVELOPER ARC SYSTEM WORKS
RELEASE Q4 2005

Sega has finally distracted *Guilty Gear* creator Arc System Works away from incremental tweaks to that franchise, though *Hokuto No Ken* retains an unmistakable *GG* vibe in the obsessive detail of its visuals and system. Ten characters from the legendary/notorious franchise appear, each with signature moves, fighting style and voice.

Controls use a stick-and-five-button setup, and three charge-up systems feature beyond the standard moveset. Chief among them is Shichosei, linking the characters' bloodily, and fatally, spectacular martial arts to their patron constellation. Performing certain moves extinguishes stars from the opponent's constellation, finally leaving them vulnerable to an instant-kill move.

EVENT

Leipzig has lift-off

Microsoft uses Europe's most eminent games event to grab the headlines, but also sets a positive precedent for years to come

Microsoft dominated this year's Leipzig Game Convention by finally announcing pricing details for its Xbox 360. The strategy was clever, in so far as none of the other big players had anything to say, but it also set a precedent that could see the relatively lowkey event flourish beyond recognition over the next few years.

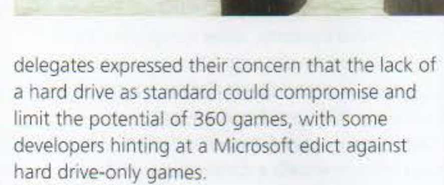
Day one saw the Leipziger Messe's six giant halls open to trade delegates only (though the next four days would see 110,000 consumers passing through its doors) and as expected there was only one seminar of note. Taking place inside a mini Greek-style amphitheatre, Microsoft's conference, at least in mood, was reminiscent of New Labour's 1997 post-election-winning party. Microsoft bigwigs, PRs and hired smiles jigged self-consciously to the Chemical Brothers' Galvanize before **Chris Lewis**, vice president of Microsoft Home Entertainment Division Europe, bounced on to the stage to give a keynote speech. This was to be high-energy evangelicalism, US-style.



Leipzig 2005 was Microsoft's show to steal, and it duly obliged, showing off a clutch of Xbox 360 launch titles to what was a generally receptive audience (even the odd dodgy-looking plinth was forgiven)

After eulogising the 360's strengths for 20 minutes, Lewis eventually revealed that the Xbox 360 would come in two flavours: a core system without a hard drive for €299 (£209), and a higher priced bundle with hard drive, wireless controller and headset for €399 (£279). Before reactions could be fully gauged, strident music was again pumped through the speakers to signal the end of the event and, presumably, keep the tone ebullient. It also prevented journalists from dampening the mood by asking any probing questions.

In fairness, short Q&A sessions with Lewis were offered to journalists on the following day though answers were frustratingly on-message and general. In particular, Lewis was bullish if evasive about the two-tier approach which many had already criticised as being potentially confusing to consumers. 'It would offer choice to players and flexibility to retailers' was the staunch company line. Off the record, other industry



delegates expressed their concern that the lack of a hard drive as standard could compromise and limit the potential of 360 games, with some developers hinting at a Microsoft edict against hard drive-only games.

Backward compatibility also emerged as a serious issue, though Lewis refused to be drawn on specifics. Although top-selling Xbox games would work on a 360, he wouldn't say how many: "The most popular games will be compatible – it's about emulation, as you know. But again, for those who want backward compatibility it will be there immediately with Xbox 360. And we will continue to work on backward compatibility consistently. The key titles that people care most about will be backward compatible."

Rumours that a hard drive would also be required to play emulated Xbox games on a 360 were also confirmed, another factor undermining Microsoft's stance that the core system is ideal for those not possessing the company's first console. Behind closed doors Microsoft also showcased its most impressive games, though considering the closeness of the launch it was frustrating that none of them were playable. While the likes of *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Kameo* and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* all displayed stunning visual fidelity, signs of new, innovative game experiences throughout – something Lewis was at pains to promise in his keynote – were not guaranteed.





Nintendo's playable roster was a mixed bag, taking in the likes of *Mario Smash Football* (above) and *Twilight Princess* (right). But it's clear that the company does more than most to put games into gamers' hands at events such as this

Newswire



JoWood fights on

In the first good news to be associated with the beleaguered publisher for what seems like forever, JoWood has seen the bankruptcy claim filed against it by Australian developer Perception rejected by a Viennese superior court. The claim was in retaliation to the publisher's public abandonment of Perception's *Stargate-SG1: The Alliance*. "The title in its current form," said JoWood CEO Albert Seidi at the time, "does satisfy neither our quality requirements nor the fans' expectations." The publisher sought remuneration for the amount it had invested before Perception CEO Ben Lenzo bit back. Both firms, however, still maintain ownership of the rights to the TV show, each promising to develop their own adaptation.













Clockwise from main image: those Xbox 360 price details in full; wifi multiplayer *Mario Kart*; Nintendo's Jim Merrick has the task of simultaneously delighting and frustrating retailers with Nintendo's Game Boy Micro announcement; a 2005 version of Pan's People do their thing for the new hardware – in console-matching colours, naturally; *Kameo: Elements Of Power*; *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*

Elsewhere, a strong showing by both Nintendo and Sony displayed encouraging signs that Leipzig had already established itself as Europe's premier game event. With pods providing playable titles including *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, *Mario Smash Football*, *Mario Baseball* and *DDR: Mario Mix*, Nintendo's stand was overrun during the consumer days. A suitably chilled-out beanbag area with playable *Nintendogs* and eight full-size go-karts fitted up with multiplayer wifi *Super Mario Kart DS* also proved that no one does it better than Nintendo when it comes to pulling in the crowds with competitions – and soft furnishings.

With strong showings from the likes of Ubisoft, Konami, Eidos, Activision, Midway and Sega, the event felt like E3, only with fewer rapacious journalists and cleaner toilets

In terms of news announcements, however, it was plain that Nintendo is waiting for the Tokyo Game Show to grab headlines with all things Revolution. Two new DS colours are due in Europe on November 4: fetching pink and blue, and the Game Boy Micro's four coloured variants and pricepoint of £69 were announced. Though the Micro is hugely desirable, retailers at the event grumbled about potential cannibalisation of SP sales due to the close pricing structure.

Sony's press conference, by contrast, was a dour affair closer in tone to a shareholder meeting than a videogame seminar. Focusing on PS2 and PSP, delegates from Sony Germany displayed impressive figures during a presentation but failed to say anything of substance. Out on the showfloor, however, Sony had by far the most pods, games, demos and promos with highlights including a playable *Shadow Of The Colossus* and the innovative *Buzz! The Music Quiz*. With strong showings from all leading publishers including Ubisoft, Konami, Eidos, Activision, Midway and Sega, the event felt like E3, only with fewer rapacious journalists and cleaner toilets.

Unlike the divided factions and politics that have caused events in London to be abandoned or changed beyond recognition, Leipzig looks certain to go from strength to strength. In particular, it offers publishers a forum to present games to both public and trade alike in a well-managed venue with a wonderfully warm and hospitable atmosphere. Coming as it does in the crucial Q3 period, it's also the perfect opportunity to generate press interest and demonstrate games that may have only been glimpsed behind closed doors at E3. Despite Sony and Nintendo holding off their big announcements until the Tokyo game Show, the Leipzig Game Convention 2005 was a definite success.

OUT THERE



THE NEW PAC-MASTER

The high score is something of a lost art among the majority of recent console games and gamers, but the past month has seen a flurry of classic arcade high score activity, all documented breathlessly by electronic scorekeeper Twin Galaxies. While 80-year-old Doris Self failed to take the widely publicised world *Q-bert* title at CGEUK, this month Abdner Ashman was declared the *Ms Pac-Man* champion, scoring 921,360 in five hours and 47 minutes. Ashman actually set the record in 2004, but had to endure a gruelling ten-month verification process whereby the arcade board itself had to be put through a series of tests to ensure its legitimacy. Astonishingly full details of the ordeal are at twingalaxies.com





A total of 110,000 consumers attended the Leipzig Game Convention, which has swiftly made a name for itself in Germany while similarly styled events in the UK have faltered



INTERVIEW

Guiding Starr

Gaming is a young business, and MMOs are even younger. Two of its rare veterans are planning to reshape their future





Starr Long, producer on NCsoft's *Tabula Rasa*, has a working relationship with Richard Garriot that dates back to the original *Ultima*. Now the pair are looking to expand the definition of the MMO with a game which aims to recreate the intense activity of the battlefield in place of the mannered duels of many similar games. It's travelled a long way since its original inception as a whimsical sci-fantasy epic, and, in the same time, the arrival of the *World Of WarCraft* phenomenon has changed what people expect of a genre long argued to have only niche appeal. So what does he have planned for this newly clean slate?

Despite recent breakthroughs, many gamers find their first few hours of an MMO very offputting. Why do you think that is?

If you look at most games, or most genres of games, the bulk of them are pretty unwelcoming to a non-gamer. But MMOs also happen to be the most complex, with the most systems interacting with each other, and we've done a *horrible* job as game makers making them accessible to the average gamer, making them consistently rewarding. Or of escalating the player's exposure to things – with *Ultima Online* it was like we dropped you naked into a world with a sharp stick and said: 'Go have fun!' and that was it. [Laughs.] The complexity, especially at the endgame, is what makes them so compelling, but we need to learn how to introduce elements in such a way that it doesn't overwhelm. Otherwise we're just cannibalising the same customers over and over. *WOW*'s broken out of that to some extent, but even their numbers, compared to gaming numbers overall, are microscopic.

How do you prepare yourself for building complex MMO worlds – will it reach the point where designers have to spend three years at university doing political economy before they can begin?

[Laughs.] I guess there have already been some precedents set about the nature of virtual property, but even back in the days of *Ultima Online* we came to the realisation that we really are a government, and we have a responsibility, except it's not providing enough fresh water, it's providing enough dragons. You know, our utilities are slightly different, but it's the same mentality of service. Actually, a lot of times I'm envious of real-world governments because they don't really seem to be as accountable as us. The thing about what we do is that if people don't like what we're doing, they walk away and we stop getting money. If you don't like what the government is doing, you have to



Massed, coordinated combat is a hugely appealing prospect, but *Tabula Rasa* still has some difficult questions to answer in terms of balancing different players' needs in the world







The stylistic shift *Tabula Rasa* has undergone is clear from the contrast between an early shot (above) and a current one (left). There's no doubt that the new style is more familiar – and probably more generally palatable – but it lacks the arresting impact of the original's butterfly-winged gazelles and elegant, fantastical figures. Hopefully, good sales figures for the game will bear out the reasoning behind the striking change of tack

wait a few years and hope you can vote them out – it's not like you can stop paying taxes to get them out of office [laughs]. They get away with so much more than we can.

What makes *Tabula Rasa* different?

The biggest thing is that we're trying to create a game that gives you a feeling of being at war, as opposed to most MMOs where, regardless of their trapping, you're a hunter and the prey is always standing in place waiting for you to kill it. We want to make a much more dynamic environment that fluctuates not just randomly, but by a certain set of rules and variables that the players can affect. And so a day in the life of a player might be starting in a

> **"We knew all along that using books and musical instruments as weapons was pretty out there, and it might not work"**

base, picking up some missions and running out onto the frontline of a battlefield. And it's a battlefield like in Saving Private Ryan, or games like *Call Of Duty* – there's artillery fire coming in, there's waves of troops heading for control points. You'll see squads of players on your side too, and a mission will come over the headset that they need you to rescue some captured elite commandos. So you go into a private, instanced part of the game with your squad to rescue them, and when you come back out onto the battlefield, a dropship swoops in and drops them on the field, and the frontline temporarily pushes forward because you've got them fighting on your side. But then the enemy NPCs detect this and bring out their boss, and that keeps the battlefield moving: we want to get this feeling of action and reaction.

***Tabula Rasa* underwent a radical change of style last year. How did that come about after so much work on the game?**

There was definitely some foreshadowing to the whole thing – it's not like we were running for two years thinking everything's perfect! – but what we kept telling ourselves was that we just didn't have enough content to give people the whole picture, to make it accessible and to make people get excited about it. So it's not like we got there unprepared. We knew all along that things like using books and musical instruments as weapons was pretty out there, and it might not work – or not so much that it wouldn't have worked, as I think there'd be a small audience that would have really appreciated it. But we were making a David Lynch film with a Steven Spielberg budget, and if you're spending Spielberg money you need to know you'll make it back. So it was a financial decision as much as a creative one – we weren't making a title that would work as well as it could.

The response to *Tabula Rasa*'s change of direction showed how much players invest in titles before they're even finished. Would you ideally make the game out of the spotlight, or is there something about games that means players need time to gear up for them?

I like the fact that we're a lot more open about what we do than any other entertainment industry – I think that's what makes development so exciting, this sort of metagame beyond the game in that everything we do is interactive. And that's why I think it's the highest artform, and that interactivity can extend even outside the game itself, with our audience and the press. It would be great if we could have a constant dialogue with the consumer, and that's one thing that online games let you do once you've launched.



Yes, it's gaming's version of a one-joke wonder. Giving players a double dose of nostalgia, the recently-remixed *Duck Doom Deluxe* is all of the same gameplay of *Duck Hunt* (though mouse-based, here) told through the soundscape and weaponry of *Doom*. Exact revenge for all the ones that've gotten away throughout the past 20 years by tearing through the next with a chaingun or BFG. Though initially unchallenging (try the two-duck 'fowl' version for fastest ramp-up), and with the joke quickly wearing a bit thin, *Duck Doom Deluxe* is still worth at least a download and playthrough. And no, although you might think it a perfect fit, try as you might you still can't shoot the dog. Grab a copy at duckdoom.dayjo.org



No rest for the wicked

We talk to Ratchet & Clank's sleepless creator, Insomniac, to count sheep, and other deadly weapons

Insomniac's output has been suitably tireless, resulting in a *Ratchet & Clank* game on PS2 every year since 2001, and continuing with *Ratchet: Gladiator*, the fourth title in the franchise, due in the UK this November. Released annually without fail, and without failing to craft a pedigree action experience each and every time, there's still no sign of the sandman with regard to the future of the series, even as the twilight begins to draw in on PS2 and the dawn breaks on PS3. With seemingly no time for any serious holiday – let alone 40 winks during those 52 weeks – just how does Insomniac go about the business of never, ever tripping over a milestone? Communications director **Ryan Schneider** found the time to answer.

"Insomniac was named the third-best small company to work for in the US; we have ways to minimise the effects of crunch, but I'd never sit here and say that we don't have crunch"

Insomniac doesn't produce games based on licences, but still has to work on an annual deadline, implying a need to develop games that deliver quality in order to succeed. This seems to be one of the most punishing schedules around – does it feel that way?

It's always going to be a challenge to make games on an annual basis, but on the flipside Ted [Price, president of Insomniac] is always happy to implement programmes that take the edge off, take the stress off. Insomniac was named the third-best small company to work for in the US; we have ways to minimise the effects of crunch, but I'd never sit here and say that we don't have crunch. But we try to make it as worthwhile as possible.

It's not a backbreaking schedule 24/7 – it's conceptual from the previous release until February. We're very milestone driven and we don't miss our milestones. So I think from February/March through to August/September things are really busy.

Would you ever like to have that pressure lifted, to have a development schedule longer than a year?

I've been able to sit in on a lot of IP meetings, and we need to talk about how to keep things fresh. The perspective I hear is that some people are inevitably going to get burned out, that's just a fact of life, but the flipside from a lot of people, especially on the programming side, is that this is a deadline-driven profession, that these are people that thrive working under pressure. Having been a journalist myself, I liked that, like working under deadlines. We're all gamers – we like having a challenge. We prefer this, because it challenges us and we meet them, and we continually put out games that are rated 90 per cent plus.

How would you class yourself as a studio, considering your intimate and continued relationship with Sony?

We're a completely independent developer. We have a really good and exclusive relationship with Sony and there are no intentions of anything but. It's not a necessary thing: if we didn't have that

The *Ratchet* series continues to evolve – but not with the sort of diminishing returns you'd expect from yearly updates. See more *Gladiator* on p39

SOUND BYTES

"I always thought video games were for people with no social skills but it seems I'm wrong… now I think video games are great – but only when used as treatment."
The progressive-thinking **Dr Hilary Jones** tells his readers that games are useless (unless they're used as, er, cures for ills) in the News Of The World, presumably forgetting that the paper's football section is sponsored each week, at massive expense, by Microsoft in a bid to promote Xbox

"The next generation of [Gran Turismo] could feature traffic jams, too."
The Observer Magazine's motoring expert **Martin Love** probably hasn't played an awful lot of videogames

"Time was when computer games, a little like masturbation, were a solitary activity much enjoyed by adolescents and frowned on by everyone else."
The Times' **James Harkin** contests the more traditionally held view that wanking has actually long been enjoyed by people of all ages

"Twenty-five years ago, anyone who wanted to play video games typically had to contend with *Bat and Ball*, which involved hitting a square ball with a wonky bat. In black and white."
The Times' **Johnny Davis** recalls what is presumably the 1980 of some kind of parallel universe, where *Pac-Man* hadn't been invented and had not been a worldwide smash. In colour

"Very soon we will be able to produce games that are the same as life. We're going to blur the lines between the real world and the computer-generated cyberworld."
'Father of PlayStation' **Ken Kutaragi** proves that there's still life in the term 'cyber' (so long as you find someone willing to print a claim such as "Very soon we will be able to produce games that are the same as life" without thinking to actually question it)

relationship, that we would be told to make a Vanilla Ice rap karaoke game or something like that… [Turns to Sony Computer Entertainment representative.] We can get away from that, right? We don't have to do that? Right?

But do you feel that working with Sony gives you the space to create a prestige title as much as a hopeful bestseller?

Yeah, it's very true and it's a very hands-off relationship in terms of development, also because we've a track record too. But if there are suggestions made, particularly for games across territories, they're definitely taken into account. Ratchet's a great example – one thing we learned regarding characters is what may work in the US with Ratchet being covered up all the time in *Gladiator* may not necessarily work in Japan, and we want to take that feedback to heart.

How much communication does Insomniac have with *Jak* creator Naughty Dog?

We don't really collaborate. We have a good relationship regarding marketing opportunities, and art directors talking can collaborate on cover images and the like. We have the game engine in common, but it's two different franchises going in two different directions. We'll always have a special relationship based on the founders of each studio and how they all came up together, but we're not on the phone to each other all day.

The *Ratchet & Clank* series is a fine example of instructive design – everything the player needs to uncover its secrets are there in the game. Is this thorough signposting an internal endeavour, or part of Sony's own QA?

It's down to a *lot* of playtesting. We do our own internal testing and focus, tune that, then have Sony's playtests, then move on to the next milestones. We have further internal and external playtests, then we have E3, then alpha, then beta, then an online public beta, then gold. It's a lot of fingers on those controls.

***Ratchet & Clank*'s increasing focus on firepower has been the antithesis of the pic'n'mix of styles present in the past two *Jak* games. Is this on purpose?**

No, it's not like we look at *Jak & Daxter* and wonder how we can stray from it. But I also think that what we've learned over the past few years is that our games do well because of the outrageous weapons, so we expand on that, build on what we do well and make it better.

SCEE has become the king of peripherals – the EyeToy, the *Buzz!* and *SingStar* franchises – while SCEA has focused on pushing its software. Why do you think this is?

I think that Europe is more advanced when it comes to embracing innovative types of hardware, and a lot more fun-loving. I think in the US we take ourselves a little bit seriously. *SingStar* et al will make their way to the US, but the culture needs to let its hair down a little first.

The latest *Ratchet* title retains the series' art style but differs from its predecessors in several respects when it comes to the actual nuts and bolts of the gameplay



COMPETITION

Graduating with honours

Eight teams, 11 nationalities and ten weeks of hard graft: it can only mean another successful crop of student games from Dare To Be Digital

The winner of the first Most Promising New Concept award at the Edinburgh Interactive Game Festival was the good-looking, clever and self-explanatory game-cum-aquarium sim *Fishism*



Held at the University of Abertay Dundee, the annual Dare to be Digital competition allows student take a game concept from early stages through to working prototype

It has almost become a cliché to pronounce each annual student game competition Dare To Be Digital bigger and better than its previous incarnation. Yet in terms of hard facts and figures this year has proved no exception. Eight teams from Ireland, Scotland and, for the first time, the Midlands and Yorkshire, together with eight students from Asian countries, spent ten weeks taking their game ideas from the concept stage to working prototypes.

Dare alumni can now be found working at EA, Rare, Free Radical Design, Visual Sciences, Lionhead and BBC Interactive

Industry participation grew with input from longterm supporters such as EA and Rare, as well as the likes of Traveller's Tales and Sega, while Criterion provided technical support in the form of its RenderWare engine. There was public involvement in the project for the first time, as teams let gamers loose on their work at the Go Play Games expo at the Edinburgh Interactive Games Festival. There was even an additional prize at EIEF, with Gene Therapy picking up the Develop award for the 'most promising new concept' for its *Fishism* game.

Yet, beyond the headlines, the competition demonstrates some of the more subtle changes taking place in the development community.

Perhaps most obviously, as studios bulk up in anticipation of the next-gen games, is the need for well-trained staff, and the quality of Dare's students has certainly encouraged recruiters to make the most of the opportunity. Dare alumni can now be found working at EA, Rare, Free Radical Design, Visual Sciences, Lionhead and BBC Interactive, with EA, once again, keen to plug this year's crop into its Academy programme.

Less prosaically, though, the competition also demonstrated an encouraging shift in concepts. For example, two of the strongest contenders, Switched On Entertainment and the winners of the product with greatest market potential, The Frozen North, created educational games for primary-aged children, containing database elements so teachers could integrate the software into their teaching plans. Other winners included Missing Link's musically layered supermarket-smash-up *Coda Chain* (greatest innovation), while Team Evil scooped the technical excellence prize for its connected PC/mobile title *Conspiracy: Corporate Warfare*.

It was also good to hear that some teams, and not just the winners, were keen to continue their summer efforts and try to take their games one stage further. "We're hoping to take up places in our college's incubator centre," explained **Caroline Anderson** of Northern Ireland team Silver Tongue Software. "Our aim is to set up a company offering contract work and in time develop our own intellectual property."





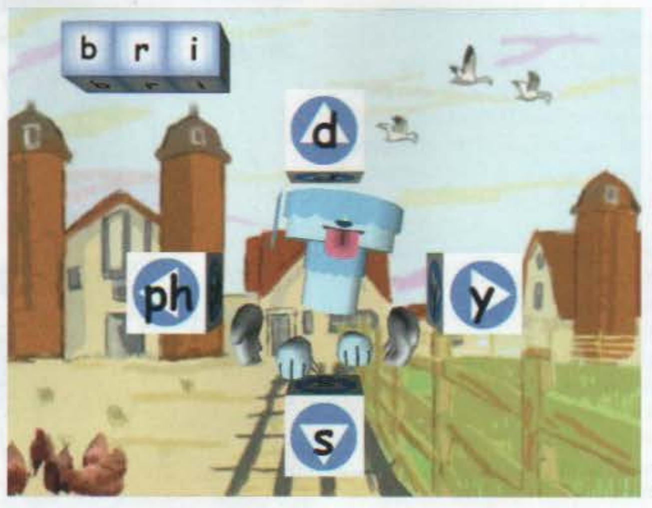
Dundee POV

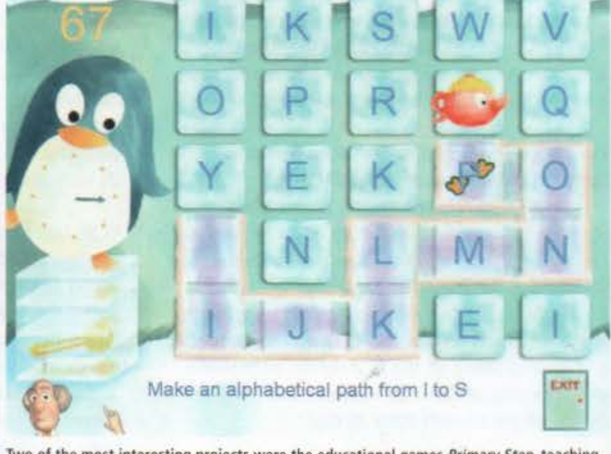
A developer's view of the Dare experience

Involved both as local developer and, in previous years, a judge, Real Time Worlds producer Colin Macdonald reckons Dare provides a great opportunity.

"We treat folk who have competed in Dare as 'graduates plus'," he says. "Over one summer they learn the kind of skills that are near impossible to teach in a typical classroom."

As for the potential for Dare to act as an incubator for new Dundee studios, he says it's a mixed picture. "Some Dare teams are making a go of it, but for the majority it's a foot-up into a job elsewhere. Others want to set something up, but feel they need to get some experience first. But it'll be interesting to look back in a decade and see how many Dare competitors are playing a leading role in the games we're making."





Two of the most interesting projects were the educational games *Primary Step*, teaching synthetic phonics, and *Professor Fribble's Fun Factory*, teaching literacy and numeracy











The definitive top 100

A new **Edge** special edition sets out to present gaming's hall of fame – with your contributions

It's been done before – not least by **Edge** itself – but later this year will see the appearance of the most ambitious attempt to spell out the 100 greatest videogames in the world today. The project, published as an **Edge** special edition, will be a hefty limited-edition tome featuring editorial on every title that makes the cut, along with interviews with key creators, game art and more besides.

In order to make this the most definitive account in existence, we're compiling our own lists, gathering lists of favourites from game developers and publishers, and then factoring in those of **Edge** readers themselves.

How do you get involved? Simply choose your top ten titles (these can be on any format and of any age, but they must stand up to scrutiny today) and, if you so wish, include very brief reasons for your choices (some reader commentary will appear in the publication). Then title your contribution 'Top 100' and send it to edge@futurenet.co.uk. More details on the publication will appear online soon and in next month's issue.

Tetris, *GoldenEye*, *Ocarina Of Time*, *Pro Evo* and *World Of WarCraft*: we're expecting all of these to feature in contributions. Keep in mind, though, that your lists should be no longer than ten games in length (we will extrapolate all data to create the final 100), and that this isn't a nostalgia fest: your nominations must stand up as greats today





Continue

Edge Online's forum
A place on the internet unsullied by total cretins

Funny gaming men
Serafinovic, Pegg, Linehan, Brooker. More next month

Game Boy Micro
So dinky we've almost lost two already. Almost

Quit

The influence of GTA
Have you *seen* Crime Life? What's going on, Konami?

Certain 'industry' blogs
We're *still* not interested, so you can shut up now

Edge Online's forum
OK, you might get the *occasional* total cretin

Author: Jon Courtenay Grimwood
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07615 1

9TAIL FOX

Cop noir with a twist of mysticism – and quite a bit more besides

It's a mark of the flexibility of the term sci-fi that it can be used to encompass the work of Jon Courtenay Grimwood. Sure, he understands computers, even serving a stint working on the novelisations of games and graphic novels, but neither science or even technology are foundational to his writing. Instead it's the gritty underworld of cop noir mixed with the conspiracy theories concerning spooks whose existence is never officially confirmed which make his bedfellows: well, it's the case with 9Tail Fox, a San Francisco-set resurrection-whydunnit with some eastern mysticism thrown in for good measure.

Lowgrade beat officer Bobby Zha has had better years. His wife's cheating on him, his daughter hates him, and all because he takes the hookers he's offered to look the other way. Oh, well. Doesn't really matter. Within 32 pages, he's dead – shot during a seemingly random stakeout. But, of course, this isn't the end of Zha's story and this is where the blurry sci-fi edge makes its mark. Transfigured, he's back on the case from another angle: trying to discover who, how and why as well as avoiding the attentions of the eponymous fox – a deathlike figure whose appearance seems to point to a metaphysical reality Zha isn't keen to accept. It's certainly a book in a hurry to make a point, and if the tautness of the investigation is too quickly tidied up in the denouement, there are worse things to be criticised for. After all, it's only sci-fi.



Author: Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (editors)
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 9 780262 182409

HANDBOOK OF COMPUTER GAMES STUDIES

The most far-reaching attempt yet to make sense of today's gaming landscape

While this magazine has treated games with respect since day one, it's taken the rest of the world a little longer to catch up. Catch up it has, though, and if MTI Press's recent outpourings are anything to go by, enthusiasm for the subject continues to blossom apace as much among intellectual highbrows as with the ringing cash registers of the massmarket. And it's perhaps this high-low combination, inherent in the medium itself, which makes the Handbook of Computer Games Studies such a welcome addition, even to the already groaning shelves of those who like to think about playing as much as playing itself.

Put together by two incumbents at the University of Utrecht, their stated goal with the Handbook is twofold: to explore the various structures available to study games – games as social phenomenon, aesthetic phenomenon, and cultural phenomenon, etc – as well as provide an authoritative tome for current research. Of course, some articles add little to the experience of any gamer – despite being couched in highfalutin' language. But there's plenty of stimulation too, especially from some of the more experienced academics in the field.

Covering a laudably comprehensive range of topics (from early arcade games to addiction issues and way beyond), this really is a huge piece of work – both literally and figuratively. Put another way, like *GTA: San Andreas*, it has the potential to keep you going for months.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Goku Makaimura

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



The kind of news that feels far too good to be true until the first screenshots convince you otherwise: *Extreme Ghouls 'N' Ghosts* is headed for PSP with series creator Tokuro Fujiwara at the helm. Building its faithful side-scrolling levels out of 3D objects, this all-new game promises to uphold the series' merciless reputation

Fight Night: Round 3

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



One of the less fantastical E3 presentations and fast becoming one of next-gen's more promising titles, *Fight Night* is ditching its HUD and leaving all the feedback to its fully fleshed combatants. Skin ripples with impact, spit flies across bloodied gloves and the fire in a boxer's eyes tells you how close they are to the canvas

The Outfit

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** THQ



Having dissected and analysed the mechanisms of the RTS genre, Relic has reassembled them into a thirdperson 360 actioner that's big on strategy, bigger on immediacy and huge on destruction. Units can be recruited during missions to bolster your numbers, while completing objectives unlocks a wealth of new hardware

Sonic Riders

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Sega's reliable urchins continue their forage for new material, this time exercising some much-appreciated gun control. Falling back on the precarious hoverboarding of the *Adventure* games, this is more *Trickstyle* than tricked out. Can developer Sonic Team bring back those majestic grinds and leaps without *Heroes'* junk?

Lemmings

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



It's hardly likely to resolve PSP's worsening identity crisis, and frantic job-allocation via the analogue nub sounds like the stuff of nightmares, but Team 17's faithful adaptation still has the original game's charm on its side. A level designer aims to strengthen that appeal, with downloadable content to come

Rumble Roses XX

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



With the precise programme of events for *DOAX2* still unknown, it falls to Konami's ringside angels and a new team relationship system to provide the all-girl sporting genre's latest softcore showdown. Online play features, and wrestlers must now play to the partisan crowd, Giant Gram style, to emerge truly victorious

Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



With a heart of enhanced Source, Arkane's firstperson RPG treks into *Might & Magic*'s darkest quarters armed with a wealth of eye-catching special effects and Havok-powered environments. Though it plays some neat visual and physical tricks with the tools at its disposal, the depth of its world should be its priority

Driver: Parallel Lines

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** ATARI



Recognising the need to reverse itself out of a particularly dismal dead end, Reflections has given Tanner the push and gone back in time to 1970s New York City. Simpler, snappier and hopefully more reliable, the game will need to recapture all of its original character if it's to stand up against next-gen criminal endeavours

Sonic The Hedgehog

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



The provisional but reassuring title of Yuji Naka's next-generation *Sonic* says a dozen times more than the early screens. SOA chairman Naoya Tsurumi describes a "rebirth of Sonic [that] will offer an unparalleled sense of speed." After a generation of near-death experiences, the kiss of life can't come soon enough



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Soviet-Unterzögersdorf: Sector 1

www.monochrom.at/suz-game

Soviet-Unterzögersdorf (Lower-Procrastination-Village) is a fictional last vestige of socialist utopian ideals and Soviet might, as envisaged by Viennese 'art-technology-philosophy' collective Monochrom in 2001. Originally executed as performance art, with an elaborate and reasonably convincing accompanying documentary website, Monochrom has updated its vision for the village and its inhabitants and culture in the form of a point-and-click adventure game.

Their choice of the format is not without its own subtext – as it too is a nearly extinct genre, Monochrom hopes the dated interface will carry with it some of the same sad nostalgia as Soviet-Unterzögersdorf's own small collective of citizens do.

Don't come to the game expecting high action. The majority of your time in Unterzögersdorf could easily be spent simply tidying trash in Redoctober Yard, and utilising Audio-transmission-unit 32 to phone Supreme Soviet to notify him of missing comrades, but dig deeper and you might discover deeper plots underway.





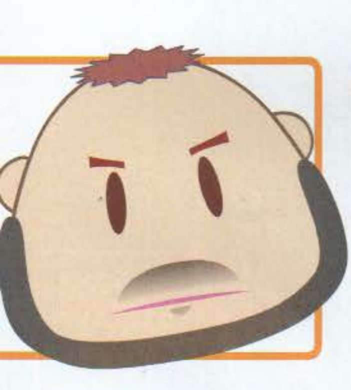
Like many Sony products, PSP was little short of a sensation when it originally launched in Japan, creating vast pre-order interest and the sort of queues that were once synonymous with big releases in the region. Since then, however, Nintendo has taken the initiative

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Ball of confusion

Japanese game producer Brick Bardo shares the reasons behind his sleepless nights



These must be confusing times, because I'm not usually this lost for something to say. Perhaps that's it, though – perhaps I need to tell you *why* I'm confused rather than think of something else instead. I'll work through the main problems one by one, and hopefully you won't be too depressed by the time I'm finished. Problem number one, then: the huge gap between the US and Japanese markets. In Japan right now, we see the DS performing especially well while the PSP labours behind. In the US, however, it's the exact opposite. Why?

In software catalogue terms, the DS is the clear leader with a wide variety of games, so we'll assume momentarily that this is behind its Japanese success. In the US, however, game availability is the same but the PSP is the market leader. When I try and explain this by weighing up the attractive prospects of innovative DS game design and beautiful PSP visuals, I'm troubled by the high number of PS2 ports available for Sony's machine. Why are such titles giving PSP the lead in America? One reason, I guess, is the rising age of the average gamer – perhaps the mainstream gamers there are less interested in machines that look like toys. Japanese gamers conversely value content above form, especially when it comes to handheld gaming.

Also, hit games from overseas fail to sell in Japan and our own games suffer a similar fate abroad. This is nothing new and I've written about it before, but now the problem is worse. Profound differences are appearing between Japan and America, and it's more difficult than ever to choose a single platform to develop for. I've been watching the European launch of PSP with bated breath.

Games from overseas fail to sell in Japan and our own games suffer a similiar fate abroad. Profound differences are appearing between Japan and America, and it's more difficult than ever to chose a single platform to develop for

Problem number two is a question of economics. *The Chikyuu Boueigun 2* (also known as *Earth Defense Force 2*) is a game I'm pretty sure will not be released outside of Japan. First, let me explain what this game is about. A gigantic disc crashes on Earth, and from it appear armies of huge insects that the EDF must overcome in order to save our planet. Drawing heavily from '50s science fiction (both Japanese and American), the game features scant animation and much that's recycled from its predecessor but with far superior special effects. It also offers a larger array of missions than the previous version – over 70 in total. This game is another reason why I'm confused this month, because it's part of the Simple 2000 budget series. This game, with its abundant high-quality content, is only ¥2,000 (£10) and it is a massive seller. What does this mean for those of us who make ¥6,800 (£34) games?

My head's spinning already, but I'm only halfway through my list. Problem three, then, concerns age certification – something that's



The Chikyuu Boueigun 2 (reviewed last month) has proved a big hit in Japan – no surprise given that it's both a) great, and b) about £10. What does it mean for other publishers?

becoming ever more severe in Japan. This isn't to say that ratings themselves are bad, but I do worry about the commercial impact of a stricter ratings system. Previously, a rating was more a guideline than a restriction, but now the law says otherwise. In effect, big department stores and chains will likely not sell titles rated 18+, and even if they do, people will have to provide ID in order to buy them. While it's true that Japan is late in implementing such measures when compared to other countries, I'm more than tired of seeing the games industry blamed for every stupid thing that the kids of today do.

But I've saved the worst until last, because problem number four is altogether closer to home. In short: the increasing number of people leaving my company troubles me, and having spoken with staff from elsewhere, I'm realising that our case is not unique – this is a trend throughout the entire Japanese industry. I've spoken with many of those that are departing, and while I don't know if this is true or not, they all tell me that they're leaving for another industry. From other game companies that I speak to, similar stories appear. Maybe these people quit because of doubts that their company will survive the coming generation of gaming – the launch of PS3 and Xbox 360.

For the moment, I'm more preoccupied with the project I'm developing to be dwelling on the impact of another console. But if I'm being honest, I'm also troubled by these trends – these omens. Which platform is going to survive this impending onslaught? And will my company even be in business when a victor is declared?

Helped along in no small part by the likes of Miyamoto's *Nintendogs*, the DS has become Japan's favourite handheld console – at least for the time being. But how should the situation overseas affect Japanese developers' priorities?

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Shadow Of The Colossus



A chance to revisit (and slaughter) the game's first colossus in a new build has taken fears over flaws from our minds – and reawakened passions for the imminent release.
PS2, SONY

Goku Makaimura



Capcom has been polling visitors to its Japanese homepage as to which of its classic titles should appear on PSP. If the new *Ghouls 'N' Ghosts* is an example, then vote for them all.
PSP, CAPCOM

Every Party



Okamoto may not yet be willing to release any screenshots of *Every Party*, but his enthusiasm, and the prospect of some gloriously dumb fun on 360, make it irresistable.
360, MICROSOFT

Speech recognition

Why staying home has gone west



Black & White 2 (reviewed on p94) continues the Lionhead tradition of using local voices for its characters. The result may be a little scattershot, but it's preferable to all-out homogeneity

Picture a barren island – a dot in the middle of the ocean. Too far from every shore to belong to any country, its inhabitants – this month – consist of the following: four jaded squaddies and a shapely young spy-in-training. Its name? Mid-Atlantic.

Mid-Atlantic is the territory gaming PRs make for when they have to explain a cynical change of heart: giving perfectly good British game characters US accents to increase their global commercial appeal. But 'American' is rather too obvious a word – Mid-Atlantic sounds a much more reasonable compromise. So, this month, Joanna Dark and the men of *Conflict: Global Storm* have all gone west, their distinctive Britishness left behind in the drive for bigger markets.

At first, it seems like a pretty fundamental betrayal. One of the reasons both those games struck such a chord with their UK audience was that they sounded right. Whatever your own accent, there was a pleasure in hearing something that sounded real. And, no matter what you think of the games, the homely voices in *Conker's Bad Fur Day* and *Black & White* added a kind of realism that no amount of graphical grandeur could bring.

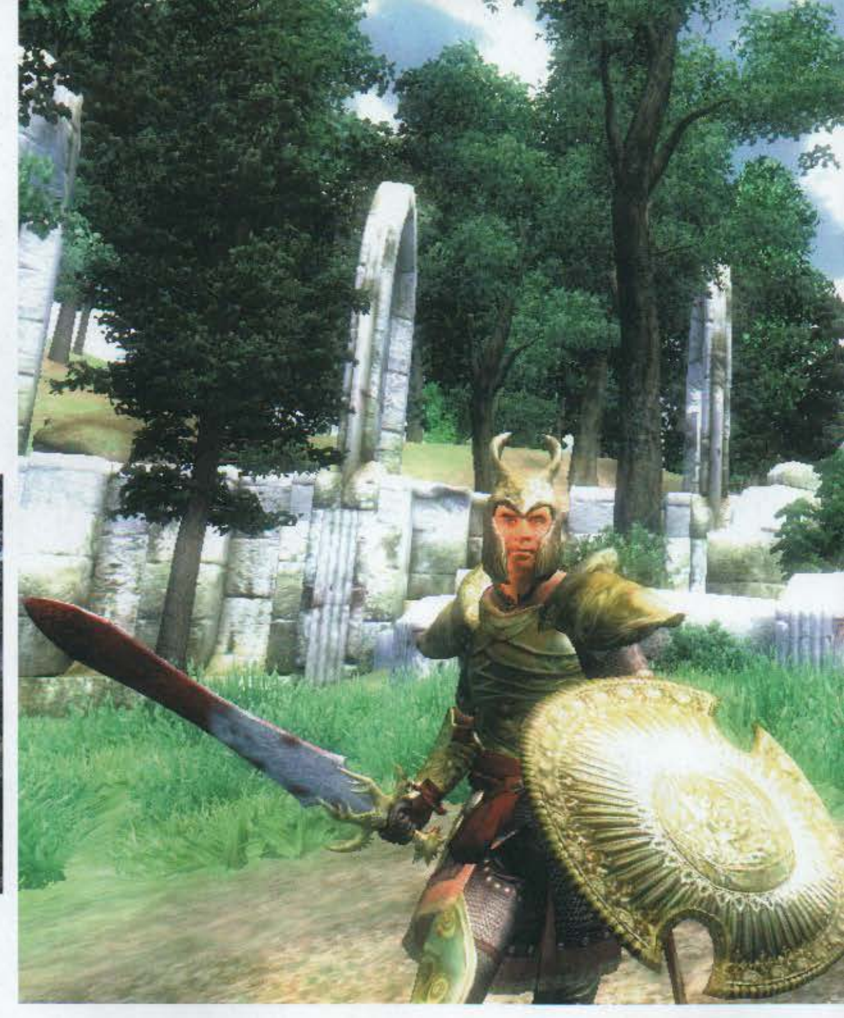
But think again, and you realise that the reason those particular games come so quickly to memory is that their British accents were an enjoyable novelty. It wasn't that you wished all games could sound like this, but that you were glad that these ones did. So is it really that much of a loss?

Yes, it is. Not because it's soothing for parochial-minded Brits to hear familiar slang in the games they play, but because the novelty that made games pleasurable for them was just as present for the Americans or Australians or French or Koreans who were playing them. A different twang is just as refreshing for them as a familiar one is for us.

Again and again games have proved that it's the unpredictable characters – the chubby plumber, the toffee-nosed archeologist, the washed-up Mafioso – that win the world's affections. Taking games which have made their name on the strength of the unique and distinctive characters they feature and shipping them all off to Samesville, USA is by no means a guarantee of greater success.



The player can purchase a house within a number of towns, essential for storing spoils, resources or valuables without becoming encumbered. Or maybe hoarding a collection of books, spoons or Moon Sugar. Several breeds of horse are available for transport and protection, as well as prestige



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

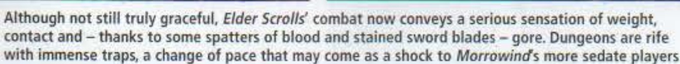
Don't know your Dagoth Brandy from your Dagoth Ur? Your Dwemer from your Daedra? Don't worry about it, says Bethesda

It begins, as always, in prison. But while the player awakes surrounded by flickering torches, rusty manacles, slimy cobbled walls and bare-bones furniture, there's something more than just visual fantasy archetype here, a whole new kind of magic – physics. Those rusty manacles can be held, thrown and ogled as they sway and clatter hypnotically, casting the kind of spell that we're just not used to seeing in such an expansive, intricate RPG world as an *Elder Scrolls* title. But more on that later.

Instead of defining your character from the very off, as in *Morrowind*, you'll first get a chance to spend some time learning of the workings and weapons of *Oblivion* before being made to choose your class, along with major and minor skills and a birth sign. And then? Well, the world of Cyrodiil – 16 square miles of it, half-covered by forests, packed with 9,000 unique objects and 1,000 locations, including 200 dungeons – is then open for business, whether it's work or curiosity, whether it adheres to the game's main quest or not.

Those who want to get lost in this overwhelming realm can still do so, treading their own paths at whatever pace or thoroughness they choose, but a friendlier structure is in place for those who want focus. Once a location has been uncovered, it can be fast-travelled to at any time, apart from when the player is in a dungeon or in combat. A sensibly partitioned notebook is on hand to track pertinent information and log active quests, and conversation strands with NPCs – all fully voiced – are now colour-coded to register new information; essential, if far from innovative, changes that prevent the glut of subquests and information turning into a horrendously messy backlog of confusion. This newfound friendliness even goes as far as offering an onscreen compass in place to guide you to your next objective.

As is typical, you can join a guild from the off to improve your skills and exploit the perks of such an allegiance. Four of them are available: Mages, Fighter, Thieves and The Dark Brotherhood. Unlike *Morrowind*, however, the interests and quests of these factions do not overlap, meaning that it's now possible to rise through the ranks of all four independently. The first two are a force for good, while thieves are less morally stringent, but still honourable. The Dark Brotherhood, however, only offers invitations


Although not still truly graceful, *Elder Scrolls*' combat now conveys a serious sensation of weight, contact and – thanks to some spatters of blood and stained sword blades – gore. Dungeons are rife with immense traps, a change of pace that may come as a shock to *Morrowind*'s more sedate players













The titular *Oblivion* is a hellish plane that can be accessed via a number of gates that spawn throughout the world. Some are random, and can be cleared like any other dungeon crawl, while the story will make visits to certain *Oblivion* gates obligatory at some points



Patrick Stewart lends his potent voice to Emperor Uriel Septim, while other notable mouths include the return of Linda Carter, and two unannounced British actors. Jeremy Soule is again crafting the soundtrack, hopefully providing more tracks this time around. If there's room, that is, as the dialogue currently takes up half of the game's disc space. Visually, *Oblivion* is among the most attractive early 360 titles, although it's often exploring familiar themes

to those people who have killed an innocent; once you've committed such a murder, you'll be invited to a Brotherhood domicile, a place patrolled by undead guards and draped with paintings of the Nightmother, the matriarch who slays all of her children in the night. Your first quest for the Brotherhood is something almost cruelly light-hearted: an *Elder Scrolls* spin on Cluedo that ends, of course, in multiple murders.

Xbox's *Morrowind* port will be all too grateful for.

But perhaps the most engaging new aspect of *Oblivion* is its schedule, with every NPC now occupied with their own day/night routine, and with a series of responses to situations that extend beyond just a change of demeanour or fighting back. One shopkeeper, for instance, retreats to her bedroom at closing time, where she practices

It is, in a certain way, how we imagined Shenmue before Shenmue actually existed, when it was just a groundswell of hype, of intoxicating possibilities and lofty ambitions

Another subquest, and one that's not allied to any guild, is The Magic Paintbrush. A painter's enchanted brush has been stolen, the thief using it to create a number of Painted Trolls that have subsequently turned on their creator. Charged with retrieving the brush, and armed with turpentine (+30 damage to Painted Trolls, naturally), your quest takes place in a stylish grove rendered by the painter himself, its trees crafted from dabs of impressionism in a sparkling show of graphical diversity that players of the

archery – badly – before feeding her pet dog and then retiring to a chair for a spot of bedtime reading. If someone is, say, carrying a diamond that you need, but refuses to hand it over, you can avoid confrontation by stealing all the food from their home, and then offering to buy it once hunger kicks in. It is, in a certain way, how we imagined *Shenmue* before *Shenmue* actually existed, when it was just a groundswell of gaseous hype, of intoxicating possibilities and lofty ambitions.

The act of lockpicking is no longer a simple case of pushing a button and letting stats take care of the rest, requiring the completion of a typical minigame where tumblers have to be sealed into place with good reactions. And the art of verbal persuasion is now a conundrum so complex that there's little room on paper to explain it. It's perhaps too cerebral for its own good but, then again, it's maybe a fitting concept for such a deceptive pursuit.

Through all this, *Oblivion* feels to be the mannequin that was *Morrowind* brought to life, through the vibrancy of its copious forest foliage, the lifestyles of its inhabitants and the increased physicality of its world. But, still, it's hard to gauge whether the upgrades and slipstreaming of this latest *Elder Scrolls* will change the fact that an experience so subject to the player's will needs the player's will to drive it. And, also, whether a game so dependent on dice rolls can happily integrate the literal rolls of, say, a corpse down a stairwell in any manner beyond just improved solidity. But it still looks like we'll need several dozen hours of play time in order to find out, meaning that, in some ways, nothing has *really* changed.

The Newer Scrolls

Official mods are already being queued up for *Oblivion*, on both formats. These vary from slight but permanent options, such as being able to equip your horse with armour, to more novel, transitory offerings, such as one-off holidays. Jester Day, for example, sees the folk of a certain town dressing up in a suitably eccentric manner, along with a relaxation of the law – crimes are, effectively, going cheap, with fines being halved. Whether we'll see Bethesda's original wish for *Morrowind* – of PC mods becoming officially available for its console relation – come true for *Oblivion* is yet to be seen, but remains a possibility that is yet to be quashed.



For all that their animation and texturing can be rough, cutscenes are put together with a cinephile's eye, and they look luxuriously at home on the PSP's bright widescreen display



GTA: Liberty City Stories

Another trip back to 1997 – but this time at the controls of Rockstar's portable pilferer

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR LEEDS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E154**

After another chance to see, and a first chance to play *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, our worries about it remain: that it might not suit its platform particularly well, and might present a somewhat stale retread for such a traditionally trailblazing series. But they remain peripheral to the more serious matter of it meeting the substantive standards expected of a *GTA* game, and on this score, with one exception, it gives little cause for concern.

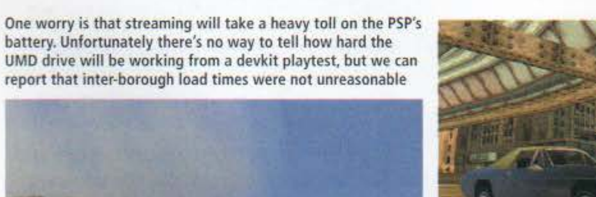
The controls have been logically slimmed down for the PSP's reduced button set; indeed, they're arguably less fussy now, though you might miss independent camera movement, since this is now a left-trigger modification only. On foot, our antihero Toni Cipriani can lurch a little unpredictably under analogue control (we weren't able to try the D-pad alternative), but target acquisition and selection using the right trigger and D-pad works well. Crucially, driving is as magnificent as ever, losing not a lick of its speed or its unfettered, physical exuberance, whether in a heavy sedan or on a nimble dirtbike. A three-star pursuit that takes Cipriani across to Staunton Island for the first time was graphic evidence that police drivers' aggression, and the thoroughness of the damage modelling, are utterly undimmed.

Rockstar has confirmed that there will definitely be no air transport in *Liberty City Stories*, but you will be able to ride the waves as well as the streets, and in more than one sense, too. Light watercraft can be driven by yourself or an NPC: at one stage, we had to ride shotgun for Don Salvatore on his speedboat, picking off pursuing feds in a firstperson shooting gallery. But Liberty City has also gained (or rather, given its prequel position in the timeline, not yet lost) a ferry service that will provide alternative island-hopping routes to the bridges. This could be the most significant of many subtle changes to its geography.

It's strange and not a little wonderful to find such a large, unrestricted virtual space – including, unlike *GTAIII*, some detailed interiors – resting in the palm of your hand. Currently, the only serious compromise is a painful, but not game-breaking one: the Liberty City of 1997 is a relative ghost town, lacking in atmospheric pavement bustle and, more frustratingly, missing a steady stream of autos to thieve. Aside from this, technically it's practically indistinguishable from its forbears; and in terms of content, the input of Rockstar North's script team should ensure that the recipe hasn't lost its flavour (down to the profanity-laden radio announcements), even if the freshness of the ingredients leaves something to be desired.



On his return to Liberty after years in hiding, Cipriani is reluctantly put to pasture as servant to one of the Leones' less pleasant lieutenants, but later missions suggest a climb back up the ranks to right-hand man



One worry is that streaming will take a heavy toll on the PSP's battery. Unfortunately there's no way to tell how hard the UMD drive will be working from a devkit playtest, but we can report that inter-borough load times were not unreasonable





Hail bloody Mary

Little did we know, when outlining the un-Christian missions in last month's preview, that Rockstar had quite the opposite planned. Suffering from Catholic guilt about his life of crime, Cipriani turns to the confession box, where Father Ned sends the penitent mobster on 'divine missions' that serve his own warped agenda. We were asked to kill three celebrities – or 'false idols' – before they could reach a radio station and broadcast their ungodly self-worship, with a rocket-launcher kindly paid for by the generous priest. It's a welcome sign that Rockstar North's black humour – crude and self-referential – has made it to this outsourced episode intact.







Thanks to, and hopefully as a result of, its delay until early 2006, *Curse* will have to shine in order not to get blotted out by the prospective next-gen swell, from the reality of Xbox 360 to the increasing momentum of PS3







Castlevania: Curse Of Darkness

Konami opts for the devil you don't know, as this latest Castlevania chooses to get its kicks from sidekicks

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2006**

With the franchise's shining 2D pedigree continuing to live on in a series of handheld instalments, it wasn't until *Lament Of Innocence* on PS2 – featuring evocative locales within a castle hub, punchy whip combinations and memorable music that ranged from the slight to the grand – that it found its feet in three dimensions. It's perhaps thanks to this newfound confidence – or maybe due the guilt of *Nanobreaker*, and its crippled ideas – that *Curse Of Darkness* has, at first glance, decided to jettison its hallmarks: no Dracula, no Belmonts, no whips.

Having deserted his master Dracula, abandoning him to defeat at the hands of the Belmont family, devil forgemaster Hector becomes embroiled in the disintegration of Europe following Dracula's demise and the release of his curse, and the subsequent death of his girlfriend. Hector, sword in hand, returns to the ruins of his former home to investigate and confront the situation, accompanied by the Innocent Devils, his band of supernatural familiars.

Heart collection, special weapon attacks and the overcoming of environmental puzzles in Dracula's intricate palace – all these functions are now delegated to Hector's menagerie of faithful Devils. Operating under some unexpected but not unwelcome buddy AI, these creatures can be ordered via the D-pad to freelance as they see fit, or to back Hector up as required. They also wield a variety of distinctive super attacks, the kind of traditional pseudo-smartbombs that use up the player's supply of hearts and result in the game's most vibrant flashes of offence. The Devils include a weapon-wielding tank of a character capable of going shoulder to shoulder with Hector in the fray, an airborne lizard that discharges rains of daggers as well as gliding Hector across gaps, and a small insect-like demon able to top up health.

While combat feels busier this time around, with enemies crowding the player far more than the prowling, agile packs of *Lament Of Innocence*, the actual swordplay doesn't feel as complex in early play, especially with just one attack button, modified when used in conjunction with the block button. The multidirectional dodges and flips, however, are in attendance, and responsively so. In its present state, the game looks gloomier and muggier than *Lament*, possibly as a result of camera freedom. Whether it gels together as an atmospheric whole – surely a vital characteristic of the series – is essential.

Fresh from *Suikoden IV*, *Castlevania* veteran Michiru Yamane will be providing the all-important soundtrack. *Curse Of Darkness* will be the first game in the series to include vocal performances in its in-game soundtrack, not least a tenor's contribution to its ending sequence





Items can be crossed with weapons and armour to evolve them. Hector and his Devils also improve with experience

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **GENKI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 24 (JAPAN)**

Ikusagami

Genki's crowd-control action title invites a new sensation from the Emotion Engine: disbelief



Unleashing special attacks produces another layer of graphics chip-frying effects, nearly rivalling *Otogi*'s soft-focus apocalypse

Ikusagami's engine judiciously juggles level of detail on its models relative to the player's immediate position; even if the coating of filters can't disguise this sleight-of-hand, given the number of onscreen models it seems probable that you won't really have time to notice

The current Japanese industry climate has inspired a spate of mergers, but earlier in the year Genki – developer of such varied offerings as the modern-day *Kaido* and *Shutokou Battle* racers, historical samurai piece *Shinsengumi* and fast-forward future mech battler *Phantom Crash* – reversed this trend by buying back its independence from shareholder Konami. While the two companies are to maintain their occasional publishing ties, Genki is looking to make an open showcase of its ability and ambition in time for the Tokyo Game Show – to secure its next-generation prospects, and draw the curtain on its PS2 era with a bang.

Or rather 10,000 bangs, to be precise, this being the maximum combo length possible in its sheer force-of-numbers assault on the *Dynasty Warriors* template. While developers such as From Software and Capcom have attempted the magic formula with varying success, neither has done so with *Ikusagami*'s battlefield logistics, fielding up to 65,535 characters (a number which should be familiar to anyone who's ever even dabbled in computer programming). Such quantity has obviously taken its toll on model and landscape detail, but the backdrop of luminous skies and hazy lighting, and an intimidating storm of particle effects as the front lines clash, massage the game's visual quality beyond what might have been expected.

Though set in the genre's familiar Sengoku-period stamping grounds, the game shrugs off its forebears' tentative connection to history, pitting two heroes – one female, the other wolfen – and their human troops against demonic invaders. It's not yet apparent whether engagements will contain objectives any more complicated than scorching the earth of all opposing forces, but other heroes can be met on the field, and friendly troops are present in radar-clotting numbers to hopefully play a larger role than mobile scenery. Otherwise it's warfare as usual, with standard attacks charging an even more devastating special attack, and a variety of upgrade items, weapons and special moves awarded for turning the tide of battle.

Both the scale of *Ikusagami*'s conflict and the shadow of its inspiration all but guarantee the mechanics of combat will be a simple affair – the question is whether the experience can justify condemning another DualShock's Square button connectors. Perhaps even as a faintly interactive tech demo, *Ikusagami* will succeed in turning heads at its Tokyo Game Show appearance, but its ability to seduce players as well as technical observers will be decided in those first few landed blows. If Genki has engineered those successfully, the next 9,990 should follow easily enough.





Those hoping for more than combo-count gratification may be set for disappointment, though castle sieges (top) could prove more involved than a series of funnels and bottlenecks for that endlessly shallow pursuit



Tokyo hardware racer

Although *Ikusagami*'s vast show of numbers is likely as much a warm-up for Cell-wrangling as it is an advertisement of the developer's abilities, Genki's first next-generation offering is a new *Shutokou Battle* for Microsoft's machine. Previous versions of the free-riding city racing game on Dreamcast and PS2 have suffered trade-offs in traffic density (or even traffic existence) and framerate to support the streaming technology – areas that, going by *Test Drive Unlimited*'s example, Xbox 360 should be able to handle without its silicon breaking a sweat.



The arcs of Inugami's blades can strike as many as ten enemies in a single attack, as is typical of mass-combat action games – judging by the angry red swarms on the radar, that only leaves another few thousand to deal with



Hitman's great strength is that all but the very gravest of its unforeseen scenarios feel redeemable. Admittedly, the most likely outcome of the above stand-off is carnage, but even that can be turned to your advantage if your tactics are sound







Hitman: Blood Money

IO Interactive's masterclass in stealth begins its next lesson, with no intention of dumbing down the curriculum

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER 13**

Even in an industry fast pursuing the high-concept production values of Hollywood, *Hitman* is an exemplary professional – a series with the art style, technical proficiency and thematic conviction to withstand the lengthiest tests of time. Also, it consistently leaves its genre peers wondering how a title so obsessed with the meticulous machinations of stealth can retain such a delectable mind for murder. *Blood Money* – the series' fourth batch of assignments – leaves a great first impression, adding more than just the weapon upgrade and collection system behind its title and improving its overall technique in a precise and prudent manner.

Beyond the character progression, bumpmapping and slicker presentation, it's the intricacy of its worlds that continues to set *Hitman* apart. What use, it asks, are games that place you in the shoes of an assassin while providing no scope or arena for improvisation? In a vein more of *Silent Assassin* than of the recent *Contracts*, *Blood Money* offers a skillset that's as dedicated to setting traps as it is to managing their unforeseen consequences. With a new notoriety system adjusting the idle behaviour of NPCs as you establish your own approach, the ability to efficiently and, when necessary, brutally safeguard both your anonymity and mission objective is paramount. Agent 47 can accordingly make human shields of anyone (except, at this point, bodyguards) that haplessly falls within reach. NPCs can be swiftly headbutted as a first strike, shoved to the floor if they present an obstruction and slammed into scenery should the opportunity arise. Overall, the player's sense of power and control over the game's civilian pawns is more pronounced than ever.

The game also continues to humanise its inhabitants more deftly than most. A victim in *Hitman* isn't necessarily a charging assailant or even a hostile patrol, but a character whose shoulders you can brush without reprisal, whose company you can keep without suspicion and whose gaze you can meet without alarm as you single out their vulnerabilities and the technicalities of their demise. In *Blood Money*, this again means exploiting and dismantling the many protective agents at work in its domain: the physical environment with its many barriers and shadows, the wary entourage that directly shields the intended victim, the civilians that seldom react calmly to the sight of a killer going about his business, and the intricate lattice of behaviour patterns that sets the whole puzzle-box in motion.

Currently, only one level is in presentable form, though the strength of its example speaks promisingly of what's to come. Even when handling such modern fads as 24-style picture-in-picture (used to indicate significant events such as character arrivals and discoveries of your handiwork), the game complements its existing formula without ever compromising its identity. Its missions would be the first to prove that a last-second slip can put the best-laid plans to waste, but when you're as readied as IO seems to be, with an aim that's as true as *Hitman's*, surely all that remains is to squeeze the trigger and collect.





In the current build, the movements of characters such as the casino receptionist pictured above are unusually stiff and unnatural. Considering the overall quality, however, we fully expect these issues to be resolved before release



Hitman's latest engine provides undeniable polish, but its art style remains as exotic as it's ever been, striking a fine balance between stark realism and eccentricity. This is a believable world, but at the same time a cinematic one

Mission: Unpredictable

Ever since those of its second instalment had players tied in emergent strategic knots, *Hitman's* missions have had a reputation to uphold. The opening level of *Blood Money* is as demanding as it is enthralling. You can prod its depicted world – a Vegas casino hotel – and it reacts, bend it and see its path of events change, or smash it and watch it collapse. So, when charged with the task of taking out the participants of a scheduled hand-off, do you exploit the bladder weakness of one and make his next toilet break his last, hide atop the hotel elevator for a piano-wiring, or construct a more elaborate plan to infiltrate the exchange itself?

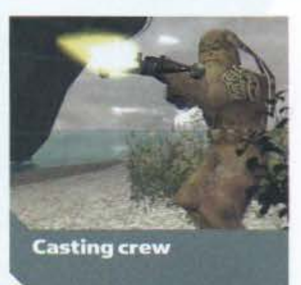
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS/ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 1**

Star Wars Battlefront II

Pandemic stuffs its Star Wars toybox to bursting, but will it be fun without friends?



PS2 *Battlefront II* will support 24 online players in a single game, the Xbox version 32, and the PC up to 64. There will also be a PSP port, handled by Savage Entertainment, supporting wireless fourplayer action



Casting crew

The command posts that formed the slender strategic heart of the first *Battlefront* have been made more valuable in the sequel, offering an opportunity to switch character classes without dying – though any shortage of health and, if applicable, ammo will be carried over. This widens tactical choice, offering location-specific access to a menu of over 60 playable characters, extending beyond troopers and Jedi to include races like Wookies and Bothan spies, and individual stars from Leia to Boba Fett. Each has its own weapons and attributes (but all can now sprint, using an energy meter that Jedi must also use for their individualised Force powers). It should further enable the freestyle, playroom improvisation that always was *Battlefront*'s strong point.





The function of the Star Wars game has changed in the 22 years since Atari's vector arcade cabinet sketched out the Death Star's trench in lines of glowing phosphor. Once skeletal echoes of the films, Star Wars games are now closer to being the meat on the bones of the franchise, fleshing out everything from its ancient history (in *Knights Of The Old Republic*) to the economic and social detail of its universe (in *Galaxies*). Released on the same day as the Episode III DVD and featuring that film heavily, *Battlefront II* almost acts as a companion piece, providing a full-blooded realisation of battles, characters and technologies that Revenge Of The Sith did little more than telegraph.

But Pandemic didn't make *Battlefront* the biggest-selling Star Wars game in LucasArts' history by ignoring the same simple wish-fulfilment urge that Atari's classic satisfied. Its sequel goes further, answering fans' two oldest and most ardent desires: to be a Jedi, and to take part in space battles.

Implementing the latter in a large-scale multiplayer combat title presents a technical challenge, the former a conceptual one: how to introduce player-controlled superheroes without disastrously unbalancing the game, or making a mockery of its source material? Pandemic has tackled both with invention.

The thrilling but inevitably disorienting dogfighting is eased a little with a helpful targeting system (which, in fact, proves a boon throughout the game), while its staccato rhythm is broken up by cunning use of the vast capital ships. Docking bays can be landed in to hijack enemy fighters for the sheer cheek of it; or you could fill a shuttle with troops and attempt to penetrate the ship's interior on foot, on a sabotage mission.

Despite its focus on Episode III, the game spans all six episodes, and the heady nostalgia of new 'classic' maps like Dagoba and the Death Star may make them firm favourites. All the original game's locations are present, but changed substantially to level the playing field

Jedi, meanwhile, are limited to one character per side – determined by location and position in the timeline – and introduced according to conditions set by level design or the game's host (unlocked by time or points, assigned to the best or worst player, etc). Cleverly, their use is restricted by a timer that's extended when they deal damage and reduced when they take it, and though powerful and fast, they are weaker in long-range combat than other units.

Gratifying as these additions are, *Battlefront II* will stand or fall on the delivery of two more important promises: a greater variety of tactical objectives – such as flag capture and hunt missions – and their application in a more extensive, thematically solid and thoughtfully designed singleplayer campaign mode. The fact is that a majority of the game's legion of console users will never experience its multiplayer basis to the full, and they too deserve to have their daydreams brought to life with such impeccably faithful sound and fury.



The twin-stick controls for space combat are comprehensive – offering pitch, yaw, roll and throttle, plus special stunt manoeuvres – but will take some getting used to. Turrets on Y-wings and TIE bombers can be manned, as can the heavy turrets on board capital ships



True Crime: New York City

A move from west coast to the east for the series that brings the law to order



With 31,000 buildings and 1,200 linear miles of tarmac in this satellite-imaged scale reproduction of Manhattan, it could easily take a full 20 minutes to drive from Wall Street to Harlem. The subways and yellow cabs, however, will provide instantaneous transportation – for a fee

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **LUXOFLUX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

If there's one thing that sets *Grand Theft Auto* apart from its imitators (though there is more than one) it's charisma, and the closest of those imitators in terms of both content and financial success, *True Crime: Streets Of LA*, lacked it more than most. In seeking to distinguish its world from Rockstar's by asking the player to cross over from thuggery to law enforcement, and from a spoof cartoon city to a precisely mapped real-world one, Luxoflux stripped the *GTA* archetype of much of its perverted logic and rude-boy charm. Worse, the real city it chose to recreate was one notoriously lacking in architectural charisma in the first place.



Not one to make the same mistake twice, Luxoflux has keenly embraced the concept of city as star in this sequel – you'd be hard-pressed to find a more charismatic town than New York, after all – and delivered a smart twist on *San Andreas*' responsive character development in the process. The meat of the game is crim-turned-cop Marcus Reed's investigation into his partner's death, solving four major cases against four crime syndicates on the way to one of two endings, depending on the morality of his methods. But criminal life in New York doesn't stop for that, and you'll receive notification of randomly generated crimes in progress at every step. Taking time to keep the streets clean won't just allow Reed to improve his standing and the resources at his disposal within the NYPD, however; it will literally clean the streets, leading to a tidier New York with a more pleasant ambient soundscape. Similarly, neglect your everyday duties and the city will be beset with graffiti, litter, sirens and the dark mutterings of its citizens. A faintly silly exaggeration of the notion that one man can make a difference it may be, but it's also a welcome challenge to the immutable landscape most gaming takes place in. If it works, it will bring its location to vivid life in a manner quite consistent with the real New York's aggressive mood swings.

That's if it works. The PS2 code we've seen is genuinely exciting, boasting convincing scale, rich textural detail and authentic bustle throughout its enormous street map and countless interiors, all with a sheen that puts *GTA* to shame. However, it also crashes with shocking frequency. Given the scrappy state its predecessor was released in, the intimidating size of the overall undertaking and the few short months Luxoflux has in which to finish it, this could be a dark omen. Hopefully it will prove ill-founded, and the rest of *True Crime: New York City* will get a fair chance to end up tidier this stuttering, ambitious attempt to encode the whole of the Big Apple on to one small disc.



The grass is greener

Streets Of LA's story structure, which branched according to success or failure in certain missions, has been scrapped on the grounds that it truncated the experience for some players. Now, in the event of failure Reed will be asked to do favours for an informant – spend an afternoon driving the grass's cab, for example – in return for clues that will reconnect him with the narrative. It's an idea that will have to be handled with rare delicacy to avoid becoming a tedious punishment or exploitable loophole. Other diversions will include undercover busts on fight clubs and street-racing rings – fighting and driving minigames, we assume – as well as answering APBs and the option to perform stop-searches at random to boost your arrest rate.

Luxoflux is promising total freedom of interaction – from shopping to extortion and dismemberment – with hundreds of detailed businesses. Pawn shops provide a place to trade evidence for cash, which can be used to buy non-standard equipment





Scripting, voicework – featuring Christopher Walken and Laurence Fishburne, no less – and the general thrust of the narrative seem very professionally executed, albeit mired in pot-boiled cliché. The anarchic streetlife and moody movie narrative might make odd bedfellows



Four vehicles will be made available throughout the game's missions, with each one offering a teamwork element for *Ratchet: Gladiator's* cooperative splitscreen mode. Five multiplayer modes are present in online play – Deathmatch, Capture The Flag, Conquest, King Of The Hill and Juggernaut







FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCT 25 (US), NOV (UK)**

Ratchet: Gladiator

It's bullet-time for Ratchet, in anything but slow motion, with guns blazing brighter than ever before

This is Ratchet's darkest hour: taken prisoner and sealed into a menacing battlesuit, the gunslinger Lomax is forced to fight for his life as reality-TV fodder in the Dreadzone show, a deadly gladiatorial gauntlet for the galaxy's most merchandised of crowd-pulling heroes.

So, we ask Insomniac's **Ryan Schneider**, is Ratchet following in the Prince of Persia's increasingly anguished footsteps? "Let me ask you this," replies the studio's communications director, "after seeing what you've seen so far, do you think it's really as dark as it seems?" No, we don't. After playing a handful of opening missions, and being shown several in-game 'adverts' taking in a greater arc of dayglo satire than previous *Ratchet* games – heavy-handed trading card promotions, hyperactive Christmas special shows and the not-so-subtle propaganda of corporate-controlled news reports – there's no true grit here; guns still spew more colour in one salvo than most games can pack into their proudest sunsets. Nor is there any end to the series' procession of goofball characters – the return of vicious babydoll popbot Courtney Gears should see to that. It's more a bellicose Big Brother than a coloured-in *Manhunt*. "It's still a *Ratchet* game: all about the guns, gameplay and humour," continues Schneider.

"What we've learned over the past few years is that our games do well because of the outrageous weapons," he adds. But, this time around, there are just ten weapons, a slimmer selection compared to the bounteous firepower of *Ratchet 3*. They're still improved through continued use, but require modification to truly expand their power, via mods that come in two flavours – alpha and omega. Alpha mods can be scattered across multiple weapons, but omega upgrades are unique, allowing for a bespoke armoury with napalm or ice effects as preferred. Besides, just ten weapons allows for a far slicker gunswap system than the ring system of previous *Ratchets*.

Those captivated by the peripheral goals and subquests will remain suitably enchanted by *Gladiator's* numbers: the main game features 90 missions (five to 15 per planet), and the skill point collection aspect has ballooned from around 30 goals to 125. Medals are awarded at the end of each mission from a range of five grades, and a vicious extra difficulty level is offered when replaying a stage.

All in all, *Ratchet: Gladiator* is the arena-battling aspect of the series – the third game's Annihilation Nation tussles, for example – spread large and wide, and sees the franchise place a purer focus on its gunplay. And, without a more relaxed planet-hopping backdrop to Ratchet's new adventure, the question for the review to answer is this: will this heightened intensity burn itself out this time?



The bosses are the other 'heroes' of the Dreadzone reality show, but it's unclear whether the showdowns will be simple one-on-ones or something more manic. Defeating these superstars will reap trading cards





If there's an issue with *Gladiator*, it's that there are so many bullets and blasts streaking about the screen that it's difficult to know when you've taken a hit. Given the game's frenzy from the off, upgrading Ratchet's energy bar seems a higher priority than ever before



Some like it bot

From the very off, Ratchet is escorted by a squad of hovering bots, a team as useful for ballistic backup as a number of other things. Plenty of missions require 'nodes' to be captured – giant bolts traditionally acquired by using Ratchet's wrench to twist them into the ground – an objective that can be given to your bots, in return for the player providing covering fire. The bots can also discharge EMP grenades, needed to lower the shields of gun emplacements. In-game teamwork isn't just limited to AI companions, though – any mission can be played in splitscreen coop.



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**

Ryu Ga Gotoku

Sega has created many spectacular overworlds, but its surprise PS2 project could be its first spectacular underworld



Though an intentional world away from *Shenmue*'s soft, rich colours, Kamurocho's contrast of matt greys and gaudy neon has the same sense of urban solidity, likely aided by development staff's ex-Smilebit roots



Visually, *Ryu Ga Gotoku* finds a hardware-friendly compromise between realism and stylisation, finessed by slick animation and suitably threatening camerawork

Regular readers of Toshihiro Nagoshi's **Edge** column should be unfazed to learn that the game he has been working on in its absence is a sprawling, decadent Yakuza epic set in a realistically detailed red light district. Far removed from *Super Monkey Ball*, and not quite the *Shenmue* sequel that it was briefly assumed to be, *Ryu Ga Gotoku* is Sega's most ambitious PS2 project to date – a cinematic Japanese crime thriller with production values to match its decidedly adult swagger.

Set in the fictional urban sprawl of Kamurocho – inspired by Tokyo's infamous Kabuchiko district in Shinjuku – the game finds ex-Yakuza Kiryu Kazuma, the 'Dragon of Dojima', returning to his old streetside kingdom after a ten-year prison sentence. A gangster with a romantic streak, having taken the fall for the murder of his boss to protect his best friend and his lover, Kazuma is now a marked man by the thousands-strong clan he betrayed. The central scenario follows the ensuing gang war, but Kazuma also crosses paths with a young girl involved in the disappearance of a ten billion yen fortune, as well as various incidental arcs of Kamurocho nightlife.

As with *Shenmue*, if painted in darker tones, the gameworld is filled with the hum of human traffic, from which Kazuma must earn a daily living – with prospects for both honest and dishonest work. While he needs to eat regularly and make pharmacy stops to treat his injuries, Kamurocho teems with spending opportunities from the sordid to the mundane, ensuring vendetta can be interspersed with gambling and item collection. The likes of ice-cream stands, department stores and the Club Sega amusement centre are freely accessible, but other locales, such as a suitably soft-focus VIP bar, have requirements for entrance.

Though the recent Xbox *SpikeOut* seems to have contributed to the game's combat system, street fighting Kamurocho-style could be described as painful in a more positive light than that title. As well as kicks, punches and grapples it's possible to manhandle opponents forcibly through destructible background features, or bludgeon them with any objects that come to hand. The ensuing gladiatorial spectacle is intended to be more savagely effective than showily graceful, although hopefully this won't be at the expense of combat depth. As Kazuma gains experience, he earns new fighting techniques, suggesting that later encounters with some of his once-fellow lieutenants will be more involved.

Careful to scratch only the surface of their underworld in previews, it already feels as if Sega, like Kazuma, has come home to the territory it previously held unchallenged. For some, that sensation may be tempered by it being the story of the wrong Ryu – but then who could predict what would come from Nagoshi next?







The game could earn its 18 CERO rating with more than just its vicious beatings: a chance chivalrous encounter with one cast member leads to what appears to be an intriguing branching barside chat-up sequence



One-on-one backstreet brutalising and brawling seems to feature heavily, but Sega's preview video suggests there may be mass battles that could rival even the floor-by-floor clearout of *Shenmue II*'s Yellowhead Building



Coming out swinging

Currently revealed distractions include a baseball alley for Kazuma to let off some blunt trauma damage in an apparently fittingly accurate Yakuza pastime, or the ability to gamble on a range of Sammy pachinko machines (possibly not without a similar hint of irony). Kazuma can also take his chances on UFO catchers in the local Club Sega – we're hoping the game's alternate reality is fictional enough to squeeze in a few coin-ops among the gambling.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **RELENTLESS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 21**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151,E153**



Buzz! The Music Quiz

A blend of mainstream software and specialist hardware means Relentless has found a new gaming sweet spot





The host of *Buzz!* – voiced by Jason Donovan and scripted by the people behind You Don't Know Jack – has a subtle influence on the dynamics of the game, feeding feuds between players

The face of mainstream videogaming has a slice through his head which goes back as far as his ears. The inside of his mouth looks like a boiled ham, and his voice triggers odd memories of men dressed as reporters, Israelites and transvestites. So much for the holy grails of famous licences, hyper-realism and super-customisation.

Of course, the host of *Buzz!* is a perfectly appropriate pastiche of the TV quizzes that the game parodies – part Muppet, part Les Dennis – and Jason Donovan's voicework, despite his previously varied career, is uncannily believable. But it's this contrast that's at the heart of Relentless' instinct for what it takes to make non-gamers game.

The software itself is straightforward – a cartoon TV studio which forms the basis for some text-based music trivia questions, often variations on the 'beat the intro' theme. The presentation is clearly calculated to be on the palatably bland side of charismatic: impossible to hate, but hard to love. And there are flaws: the cover versions of the wide range of '60s to '00s pop are occasionally hard to recognise, and some of the game types aren't perfectly balanced.

It's irrelevant, however, since as soon as *Buzz!* arrives it's clear that it's achieved its objectives. But, oddly, the attraction it exerts is down to something which was once the badge of a hardcore gaming experience: the specialist peripheral. *Buzz!*'s buzzers ignite in anyone who sees them an eagerness to play that most attract modes can only dream of. A crowd gathers, a game begins, cat-calls and laughter erupt, and an hour later the game is abandoned in a tangle of cables as its satisfied players head off for a drink, not really noticing that they've just played a videogame for the first time in a year, or five years, or just possibly ever.

With general knowledge, sports and movie variants planned for 2006, it's already obvious that *Buzz!* is a success story waiting to happen. It's also already obvious that despite its capacity to reach outside gaming's usual audience, it's too pedestrian a product to produce a gaming revolution. And that, it's clear, is just what Relentless always intended.





The presentation of the game is laudable simply, but even with this streamlining there are a few game variants which can be hard to grasp for first-time players. Future editions of *Buzz!* will no doubt iron out these hiccups



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **SUCKER PUNCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPT 29 (US), OCT (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves

With last year's heist going like Clockwerk, it's now time for a hefty inheritance tax for Sly and the family Cooper



***Sly 3*'s (optional) 3D levels certainly work, accompanied by the draining of background colour that such a scheme presents. The fuzz-eyed fug that hits upon removing the 3D glasses is present and correct, too**

While Ratchet and Jak battle for their lives in plots however contrived, Sly has his sharp eye on something far more glamorous: his family's fortune, a treasure trove stashed away by his father and defended by traps devised by Dr M, his father's Bentley-like, masterminded sidekick.

Nevertheless, there's a bleak beginning to *Sly 3*, with braniac Bentley constrained to a wheelchair and a disillusioned Murray – the muscle – having left the fold. And the impregnation of the island itself is going to take more than the Cooper band, resulting in the bulk of the game detailing the recruitment of certain safe-cracking specialists – including tempting Murray back into the gang – needed to execute this ultimate heist.

Two new fan-demanded features appear in *Sly 3* – multiplayer and a playable version of detective Carmelita Fox, Sly's relentless pursuer and partner in flirting. The former offers a number of splitscreen cops'n'robbers modes, along with some less expected modes, such as cannon-heavy naval battling between galleons.



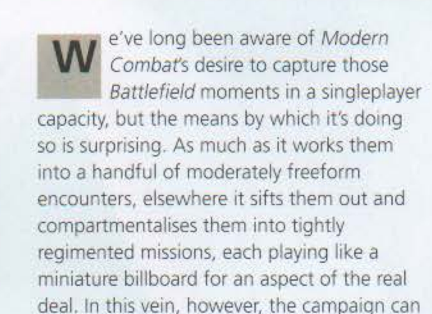
Sly's cane attacks now have three levels of power, based on the number of button presses involved. New powers can, as in *Sly 2*, be bought at Thiefnet, the game's online portal for hocking valuables and purchasing upgrades

As for the main game, the structure's similar to that of *Sly 2* – areas to roam and explore, and objectives to chew over in your preferred order – but features plenty more collaboration between characters. For example, a lemonade drinking contest that turns into a bar brawl with a pack of Australian wolves: it's just a simple button-bashing game that flicks to an all-out scrap that swaps control between Sly, Murray and Bentley as it progresses, but a slick and entertaining one nonetheless. Which sums up what we're expecting from Sly's third instalment: no breaking of the mould, just a refilling of it with warm, refreshing material.

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE/IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN/UK**
RELEASE: **NOV 18**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E146, E150**

Battlefield 2: Modern Combat

No longer a military secret, Modern Combat's singleplayer code falls into our hands for immediate deciphering



Modern Combat likes its singleplayer game to be rewarding, but is prone to taking that a bit too literally. As many awards are thrown at you throughout a mission as bullets – you're even given a medal for hotswapping multiple times



Inherited largely from DICE, the models and locations of the singleplayer game are attractive on both formats

We've long been aware of *Modern Combat*'s desire to capture those *Battlefield* moments in a singleplayer capacity, but the means by which it's doing so is surprising. As much as it works them into a handful of moderately freeform encounters, elsewhere it sifts them out and compartmentalises them into tightly regimented missions, each playing like a miniature billboard for an aspect of the real deal. In this vein, however, the campaign can be as much a denial as an advertisement, hesitant in embracing the full freedom of the multiplayer game and lacking the structure or AI to evoke it convincingly when it does.

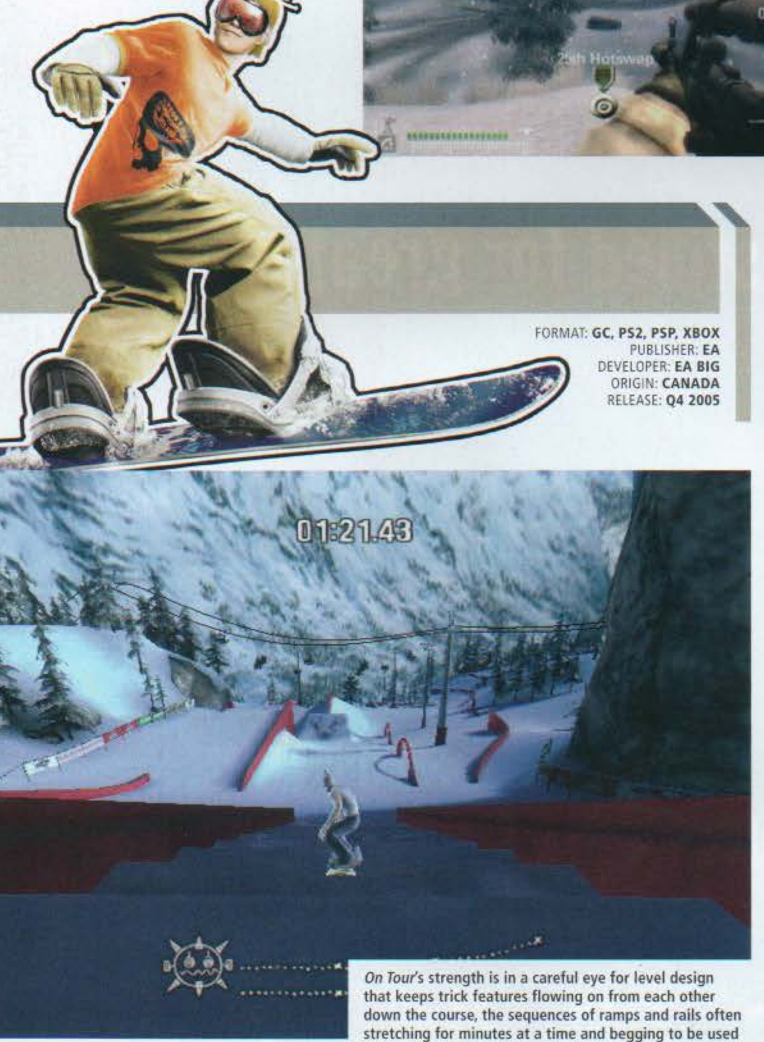
But it isn't as gloomy as it sounds. There's much to be said, after all, for hotswapping – Chertsey's bid to optimise *Battlefield* warfare for the benefit of the lone player. Freed from the obligation to respawn soldiers time and again until one side dominates the other, it's added an air of permanency to their deaths that's more in keeping with a dedicated offline game. Hotswapping allows the player to take control, with satisfying realtime zoom, of any allied soldier positioned within range of their reticule, and it's more than a mere taxi service to get around the map. This new feature not only brings a satisfying immediacy to *Modern Combat*'s game, but also achieves that touted goal of making the welfare of the entire platoon the player's concern, not just their individual hide and post-game score.

With these achievements in mind, here's hoping that EA will nonetheless stop this from becoming the game its demo suggests – one in which helicopter gunboats bereft of gunners wait impotently to be put down as the script of enemy spawns and actions snags on their continued presence. The overarching style, also, of overpowered weapons (a shotgun surely can't perform single-shot kills from 100 yards) and underpowered, abundant enemies makes for an eventful shooter but not a great deal else. *Battlefield* moments, remember, celebrate wits as much as firepower.





Reinforcements for both sides are dropped in frequently, but mere seconds of peppering from your high-powered rifle or shotgun is enough to reduce an enemy battalion to one confused man



SSX On Tour

More Maiden than Moby, SSX dresses up lo-fi to go high-speed

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BIG**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**

On Tour's strength is in a careful eye for level design that keeps trick features flowing on from each other down the course, the sequences of ramps and rails often stretching for minutes at a time and begging to be used

Much has been made of *SSX On Tour*'s 'radical' makeover from coolly digital big beat to marker-pen-and-sketch-paper rock'n'roll, but it's quickly obvious that it only runs frontend-deep – those hoping for an unselfconscious rebirth into a rocked-out *Ski Or Die* were perhaps looking to the wrong company. *SSX*'s revolution was already carved in snow with the last game's continuous mountain course, and *On Tour* serves to finesse that achievement, with fewer noticeable downtime areas for the streaming engine to catch its breath.

Accordingly, the downhill slide is more breathless than ever, with a marked increase in speed and the opportunities to gain it: perhaps a tip of the beanie to *Burnout*'s arrival in the EA extreme sports camp. Flocks of non-racing skiers can be near-missed or simply knocked down to build boost, which now induces familiar peripheral blurring and tunnel-vision effects. Courses have been tightened into a more obvious downhill slalom, though, so this distortion is possibly the optimal viewing experience for the game.

Other additions don't seem to share that same sculpted focus: you can now create a custom stereotype in addition to *SSX*'s preprepared suite, but options are limited and almost indistinguishable in-game, given the typically excessive character-outline lighting. Choosing skis rather than a board has little effect on play other than offering a tighter (and therefore easier) turning circle, and despite EA Big's best efforts, ski stunts appear more awkward than impressive.

On Tour looks to solidify the Canadian studio's reputation as the rollercoaster tycoon of EA. If the new style doesn't scribble over the old song sheet with the abandon it could have, it at least plays it harder and faster than anyone else.



The opening sequence, accompanied by Iron Maiden's Run To The Hills, may see your hand unconsciously curling into a rock salute. The scrappy vibe informs the entire frontend, set to a chorus of bass chords and radio static – it's almost disappointing when the game visuals fade in



MISS DYNAMITE

The first lady of the FPS represents the hopes and fears of not just a generation of Rare fans but, arguably, a whole new videogame platform



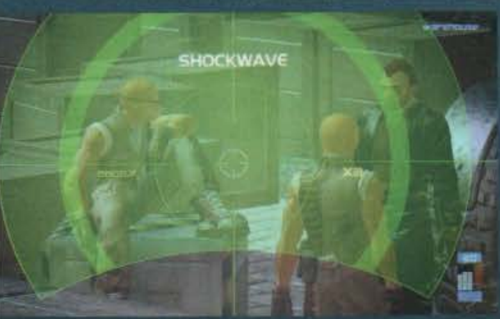
It's perhaps a good thing that *Perfect Dark Zero*'s star Joanna Dark is the younger, fresher equivalent of the leading lady who so deftly picked up the *GoldenEye* gauntlet with the original *Perfect Dark* on N64, and ran with it. For many, *Perfect Dark 64* became an instant FPS pin-up; for some, it's a love so strong that they didn't so much place the game in their hearts as keep it in a rolled-up carpet in the basement. Of all of Rare's franchises, *Perfect Dark* is one of its most prominent, this prequel one of its most anticipated and – in the cutthroat arena of firstperson shooters – most capable of showing the studio's ability to continue cutting the edges of the genre. There's an exceptional weight resting on Dark's slender shoulders, as her past is explored to provide answers regarding the genesis of her involvement with the Carrington Institute and the DataDyne Corporation, and the events leading up to *Perfect Dark*.

Not that it matters. We meet four members of the *Perfect Dark Zero* team – **Duncan Botwood**, senior game designer at Rare and multiplayer designer on *PDZ*, producer **Richard Cousins**, lead designer and project lead **Chris Tiltson** and software lead Kieran Connell – and their priority isn't one of mollifying the snowballing expectations that have built around this extremely long-awaited follow-up. Much like the team behind *Kameo* (see p54), their priority is one that's simply earnest: "We just want to make a good game," answers a soft-spoken Tilston when asked about whether or not the team feels such pressure. Which is fortunate: two of the four (Botwood and Tilston) worked on the original *Perfect Dark*, so, unlike Dark, they're certainly not any younger.

We're at Rare's studio on a Saturday, not a typical slot for a press visit, but it's likely due to the intense crunch occupying the team's weekdays. They haven't so much travelled to work in order present *Perfect Dark Zero* as simply left their desks. It's hardly uncommon, of course, for a development team to work weekends at any point in a game's gestation. What is impressive, though, is Rare's multiplayer testing setup: several rows of makeshift workstations that have taken up residence in one of the building's larger rooms for the duration of giving *PDZ*'s deathmatch modes a thorough inspection. Currently, the game

TITLE: **PERFECT DARK ZERO**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**





Most weapons have secondary functions, while some even have tertiary modes to bring into play. The M60, for example, can fire caltrops that will bring a hovercraft to a swift halt. Functions for other weapons include stealth shielding, hacking and grenades

allows for a maximum of 32 players, a number that has tumbled from the first-mooted 64 to 50, and now down to its current capacity where it looks to be locked. "We had to settle on this number to get *Perfect Dark Zero* finished in a compressed time frame," says Tilston. "It's basically issues with testing. It's possible that there may be a patch in the future, because there's underlying technology for more players in the game." Botwood elaborates: "It's a logistical exercise. We have so many options within these modes that testing all possible permutations to a worthwhile level means we can produce a quality game with 32 players, but 50 is something we've tested, and we know that amount of players works, but they're just not currently as stable as 32, so that's what we're looking at for launch."

Into this dedicated multiplayer test farm, and seemingly out of nowhere, some two dozen people enter, drafted in from somewhere, somehow to provide a suitably crowded multiplayer session.

"We can produce a quality game with 32 players, but 50 is something we've tested and we know works"

Plenty has already been made public about this facet of *PDZ* (for a recap, see '32 above Zero'). We get to play through a pair of levels, both of which have multileveled buildings as bases on opposing sides of the map. The first offers carpark-like buildings positioned directly across from one another – sniper's havens with plentiful pillars for cover – in an urban environment. The second is a large, snow-lined pit, pinched in the middle to produce some narrow corridors that link either end, each containing a pagoda wrapped in a spiral walkway. Both levels are filled with peripheral pathways, a design trait that's most visible in yet another stage: the subway. This collection of platforms and staircases is hemmed by numerous backrooms, utility corridors and below-ground shafts, a prospective hot potato of Capture The Flag strategies. But there's plenty of open air to be had elsewhere, such as in the canyon stage, a huge arena with an intricate villa as its centrepiece, jetpacks to ride, and distant, elevated ridges from which to cause long-distance grief.

The player has a cover manoeuvre, also present in the singleplayer game, which allows them to duck behind an object or lurk behind a wall while the camera retreats to thirdperson distance. They can still aim, before pouncing out from this luxurious vantage point to produce a series of surgical headshots, or something less skilful but with the element of surprise on their side. Assuming, that is, your opponent isn't toting a gun with an X-ray function, a filter that exposes other players as shockingly white skeletons through walls. Bots are available to fill out the maximum quota of 32 participants, something that is also possible online; bot slots can then also be occupied by human players who want to join in without having to loiter in the lobby. A mooted Live feature, DataDyne Kill TV, isn't certain to make it through to the finished game. The *PDZ* equivalent of *PGR3*'s Gotham TV, it was to offer players the chance to view, among other things, the best in the world strutting their stuff, but it may have to be excluded to make launch. But it's something that will also be considered as downloadable content in the future. There's one Live facet that has, thankfully, survived the hectic graduation in the run-up to release: cooperative play.

"We didn't have coop over Live on Xbox," says Tilston. "Or teleporters in multiplayer, or a smooth framerate with a lot of players." How close to completion was the Xbox version? "About 12 months away," he reveals. Each level from the main campaign supports coop, some more obviously than others. The second stage is set across a series of rooftops, with Dark taking the high road in order to provide backup for her father, Jack, who's



A collector's edition of the game will be available at launch, featuring a bonus disc containing a video feature and a *PDZ*-themed skin and 'tile' to customise your Xbox 360 HUD and Live identity, respectively



32 ABOVE ZERO

Here's a whistle-stop tour of *Perfect Dark Zero*'s multiplayer, currently accommodating 32 players: a maximum of two teams, chosen from six different factions, battle it out in Killcount (deathmatch), Team Killcount or Capture The Flag modes. Three vehicle types are on offer throughout certain levels – a bike, a troop-transporting hovercraft or a jetpack frame mounted with a gun. The arenas will scale themselves down when fewer players are in attendance and, regardless of faction, enemies appear as red on the player's radar, and allies green. The radar doesn't detect motion, but action, producing blips to mark out characters firing guns, with bigger blips resulting from more powerful weapons. Aside from the modes mentioned above, there's also Dark Ops, a *Counter-Strike*-alike with each player having just one life, and weapons being purchased at the beginning of each round.



Very likely due to Microsoft's HDTV partnership with Samsung, its logo appears in *PDZ* via Dark's PDA. 'One or two' licensed tunes are mooted to appear, but the game has its own atmospheric music, too







ROLL PLAYING

Aside from Dark's cover move, there's another skill in her repertoire that also flicks the camera to thirdperson: the roll. The camera pulls back slightly to show the dodge in action, allowing the player to retain their line of sight with little interruption. It's there to provide a quick dive in any desired direction, a move that it's hard, initially, to remember is there, purely because of how unusual it seems. To begin with, those well versed in *Unreal Championship 2* will probably be most relaxed with it; we hardly used it during our multiplayer session at Rare, but it was regularly exploited by our human opponents, using it to successfully pull the player's head and torso out of their opponent's reticule for a vital second.



The game uses a typical two-tiered health system: shield and energy. The basic pistol, with silencer as secondary function, isn't very potent, but dual wielding can make for swift and accurate rapid-fire kills

weaving his way through the complex of buildings on the ground below. The second player gets to assume Jack's position, experiencing the stage from a wholly different perspective; other stages, meanwhile, don't feature such a severe split, having both players take the same path through the stage to tackle some slightly modified objectives.

But back to the rooftops. It's a massively wide playground for sniping, something that *PDZ*'s weighty weapons excel in. The left trigger is used to zoom your current weapon – or just switch it to a more accurate firing mode if no scope is attached, slowing the player's movement and shifting the gun's barrel closer to the line of sight. The zoom is analogue, allowing for custom magnification when using some of the game's more extreme long-distance rifles and requiring two calm trigger fingers instead of just one. Those guns with moderate scopes, such as the standard Falcon pistol, can just be squeezed to full zoom without any finesse in order to up their effective range. Joanna's hike across this series of balconies and roofs, dotted with zip-lines, stairwells and raised skylights, is rife with opportunities for malicious creeping, satisfying ambushes and mischievous groin shots. Capitalising on these moments highlights the range of morbidly entertaining recoil animations: before they have the chance to turn to ragdolls, enemies jerk and flail about, every bullet producing another spasm as the enemy goes through a merry jig of death. It's vicious but gleeful – just as it was in *GoldenEye*. And it's as much a testament to the ferocity of the game's weapons as much as anything else. *Perfect Dark* received an 18 rating, didn't it? "In the UK. I don't remember what it was in the States..." offers Botwood. "It was an 'M', I can read it from here..." says Cousins, peering at one of the many *Perfect Dark* posters in between the assorted promos and Wil Overton sketches dotted across the walls of Rare's demo room.

So, is there anything the team has wanted to include, but has had to step away from to hit a desired rating, or to avoid a potential clash with Jack Thompson's anti-violence brigade in the US? "We're going to have the same approach as we had with *Perfect Dark*, which is to make the game we want to make and then rate it accordingly," says Botwood.

Again – back to those rooftops. It's the ideal stomping ground for the RCP-90, one of many weapons making a comeback from *PD64*. It's ideal thanks to its threat-detecting vision, a secondary function which paints allies as green and enemies as red, also marking out body armour and helmets and ideal for picking out the trouble spots among whatever fracas Jack Dark is embroiled in down below. Another section sees Jack ascending through the floors of an exposed building, an area under construction that's fronted by walls of glass. It's best to use the conveniently placed sniper rifle here; the RCP-90 is useful, of course, but its threat detector is foiled by glass, so you'll need to make a mess, shattering the panes and likely setting off a number of sprinklers as you go as a destructive bonus.

Near to the end of the section comes a confrontation with a gunship, most notable for a completely unexpected 'taunt'





Dark's weapon and gadget inventories are governed by a limited number of slots. Her weapon capacity is four slots wide: pistols take up one slot, while rifles can occupy two or three depending on their potency

menu that pops up at the bottom of the screen. Selected by pressing a direction on the D-pad, these are optional retorts to the smack talk trotted out by the gunship's pilot. Select an apt comeback and he'll be irritated to the point of spoiling his aim. Quite how this will work isn't clear, since each of the options is currently simply marked 'taunt', but that's for the next month's worth of design twiddling and fiddling to decide. With Jack successfully escorted and the level complete, it's on to the true showdown with the gunship, staged in a square dock area and complete with plenty of graphical showboating. Large blocks of ice are stacked around, slipping and shattering as the fight progress, and presenting the world behind them in convincing distortion. In the background, an enormous curved tower touches the sky, gleaming intensely, while a futuristic, mid-air traffic system shows numerous hover vehicles going about their business.

It's certainly pretty, as is the closing section of the game's first stage, but that's for later. The aforementioned taunt function raises a question: so, Dark now has an American accent, as opposed to an English one, as heard in *PD64*? "Yes. A mid-Atlantic one," confirms Botwood. Does he think that it'll upset some people, if only on the grounds of faithfulness to the series? "It's possibly a minor thing, but it's increasing the game's appeal. *PDZ* and *Kameo* are the first Rare games to use professional voice actors, too." On the subject of accents, is Elvis due to return? "Do you want him to come back? We were conscious that the aliens didn't go down too well in *PD64*," says Tilston, a statement that includes the aforementioned Elvis, a freaky-voiced grey alien that joined Dark in the closing stages of the game. "Players like humans killing humans, but you've then got *Halo*, that's a game about killing aliens. But… people will have to wait and see." It's a non-committal comment that, for some, will hopefully have their waiting result in seeing him exploding somehow.

Throughout the whole of the first stage there's a new voice, one persistent enough to drown out any Elvis angst. It belongs to Chandra, Dark's radio contact and advisor. Her script dwarfs that of Dark, whose speech is restricted to a relative handful of lines. During the opening mission, she's chattier than a *Halo* marine, offering not just guidance but a handful of curt or encouraging responses depending on whether or not you act on her suggestions.

Is the team still working with Ken Lobb, who worked with Rare on *Perfect Dark* and *GoldenEye* before moving on to titles like *Forza* and *PGR2* at Microsoft? "Yeah, I'm due to play some coop with him this evening, actually, which should be good. He's still as enthusiastic as ever," says Tilston



This opening level – an infiltration of the Trinity Platform complex – begins with a swift cut-scene that ends with a classic *GoldenEye* touch, as the camera swoops into the back of Dark's head, switching the view to firstperson and handing control to the player. After all these years, it's still an effective trick. What follows is a conventional training run, schooling the player in the game's basics, including a neat application of Dark's cover move – taking out a security camera before it has

OUT OF SIGHT

We ask the *Perfect Dark Zero* team a question that's also put to the *Kameo* team (p54): do you think Rare expects to be seen as reclusive? If so, does it value this privacy? "We went to E3 this year to show the game behind closed doors," says Botwood. "It had a good reception. We wouldn't have tried that if it wasn't for Microsoft. And we got to make wise decisions based on that event. So I think you'll be seeing more of our games in the future. We've traditionally been very quiet – not secretive – but we work on what we do, then show everyone when we're ready. We concentrate on making games before anything else, though."



Not so alone in the dark (left to right): producer Richard Cousins, design lead Chris Tiltson, multiplayer design lead Duncan Botwood and software lead Kieran Connell

time to close the doors between it and her. The Data Thief gadget is introduced, a device that can be used to hack keypads, as well as hotwire enemy vehicles. The hacking system involves stopping a light at the correct position as it moves around a series of concentric circles; it's easy to perform, but tricky to first get to grips with, something that the team acknowledges is in need of tweaking. If the player dawdles or gets confused, a path of arrows appears along the floor – a goad that appears throughout the whole game, to guide them to their next objective. It's something that manifests swiftly on the easiest difficulty, but is delayed or even removed on more advanced settings. As Dark hooks up with a bunch of scientists within the crisp, electric blue confines of Trinity Blackthorn – an event that will bring out the proximity mine maniac in many a *GoldenEye* veteran – her first secondary objective emerges: defend the elevator. Scores of aggressive little Spiderbots are converging on the entrance to the lift, scuttling in from every angle, the perfect scenario for slapping a Laptop Gun on to the wall to act as an autonomous turret. It's in Dark's interests for the scientists to survive, or she'll be left stranded while Chandra restores power to the elevator as a last resort. Secondary objectives like this aren't vital to progression through the game on its lowest difficulty, but become increasingly important as that setting is raised.

One perfunctory CamSpy section later – a simple introduction to the remotely controlled reconnaissance gadget – and the level climaxes with a run on to a space shuttle's launch platform, into broad, beautiful daylight. The shuttle itself looms a dizzying height into the sky, while another intricate building complex lurks impressively far in the background to the right. There's no time to stop, zoom and admire, however: over a dozen guards, two dropships and a pair of jetpack troops begin to attack, and Dark has to push her way through to a nearby elevator to reach the end of the stage, with no small amount of explosive props on hand to help clear a path through the sudden blitz.

The stick calibration at the start of the game is virtually invisible. As Dark is requested to aim at and shoot down a clutch of Spiderbots around a door, the game assigns your control system based on which stick you choose, and which direction you move it. Custom configurations are, obviously, still available

A lot of FPSing has taken place since *Perfect Dark 64*. Does the *PDZ* team feel that the genre has evolved significantly, or hardly at all? "I think there's been a technical revolution," offers Botwood. "You can add far more physics, which gives you scope to create something like *Half-Life 2*. Otherwise, though, it's maybe developing at a slow pace. But we'll see some new directions coming along soon. Speaking of which, I'm really looking forward to *STALKER*." *Perfect Dark Zero* is Xbox 360's contribution to the subgenre that's developed thanks





PDZ is reassuringly solid in action, and features some sturdy ideas, but whether that crucial subtlety is there – touches and details that kept people returning to *Perfect Dark* and *GoldenEye* – is something that can't be gauged this side of a review

to franchises like *Halo* and *Killzone*: the FPFPS, or firstparty firstperson shooter. Is there any extra pressure due to the way *Perfect Dark Zero* is, essentially, sitting on *Halo*'s throne? "Duplicating *Halo* would have been a lazy option," says Botwood. "It's one that has been taken by other developers for whatever reasons, but we didn't want to go down that path, we wanted to provide differentiation that makes people want to play it." And does



There's a thick motion blur in effect when Dark makes sudden movements. First seen pre-E3, it feels more like a style choice rather a balm for the framerate now that the game is running close to its final, optimised state. Still, it's likely that some will be irritated by it, so hopefully its removal will appear as an option

"Duplicating Halo would have been a lazy option; we didn't want to go down that path"

the *PDZ* team have a message for those fans who have been waiting half a decade for this sequel? "Yeah, buy two copies," says Tilston, "the limited edition *and* the normal one." Conversely, is there anything to say to those former fans who may have floated away? "Buy three copies!"

Is there any concern over the fact that two of Rare's biggest titles for quite some time are being released on the same day? "I think launch situations are very different to normal release dates," says Botwood. "When I bought an N64, I got three games, more than at any other time. I was about to say that the two Rare games cater to different markets, but if you're a gamer there's hopefully something in both of them for you." Or, rather, regarding the *Kameo* team: "CURSE THEM!" Botwood, we hope, jokes. Those members of the team who've been with this project since *PD64* – have any of them got six years' worth of holiday time lined up? "Chris has! Chris could probably take the next three years off," says Botwood. "Yeah, and come back with two years still remaining on the next game," adds Tilston.

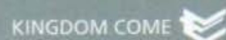






A ream of stats appears at the end of a stage, with over half a dozen pages of numbers and ratings for the player to chew over. If you're connected to Live, the 'world best' score in each category will be downloaded and displayed alongside your performance





KINGDOM COME

It's been attached to more consoles than some people have actually owned, but Rare's fantasy epic Kameo is poised to make more use of Xbox 360's potential than any other launch game

Everybody knows the pitch behind *Kameo: Elements Of Power* – as fairy Kameo, the player collects monsters and uses them to defeat other monsters and explore a world filled with fantastic creatures. But, considering that the project has been in development for some five years, and its prominence among the games Rare betrothed to Xbox when the studio was purchased by Microsoft in 2002, relatively little else is known about it. It's a title that hasn't languished in limbo, however, evolving as it shifted from format to format, a fruition that's now definitely – *definitely* – drawing to a close, as *Kameo: Elements Of Power* is to debut along with Xbox 360 towards the end of this year.

Before anything else, though, there's a triviality to get out of the way – is the name just a pun? "It is essentially just that," confirms

TITLE: **KAMEO**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

George Andreas, lead designer of the thirdperson action title. "It's about her appearance within the game, inside the monsters." When the eponymous fairy assumes the form of one of her ten-strong menagerie of fantasy creatures, she's still visible, only just, within the creature. It's an effort to allow the player to identify more strongly with the character, by keeping her in view, even when the true stars of the show are in charge.

On the subject of character, it's time to perhaps allay a fear: little of the game's direction has changed due to Rare's shift from Nintendo stalwart to Microsoft firstparty. "For Xbox, you'll see we did darken some character designs a little," admits **Mark Stevenson**, *Kameo*'s lead artist. But that seems to be the extent of it, as Andreas explains: "We didn't actually change the way we designed the game. We still create the kinds of experience that we want to create, as has been the case in the past. *Banjo*, *Perfect Dark* and others created here have always had the same philosophy. We haven't changed direction in that respect."

Rare itself has undergone a change recently, though, now employing professional talent to voice its game characters, as opposed to in-house staff. Does this mean the death of those hallmark British dialects that helped define a game such as *Conker*? "I don't think you'll see that happening," says Andreas, "because the people who create the games know what they





The ultimate list of the creatures at *Kameo*'s disposal is ten monsters wide, with two Warriors available from each of five elemental categories – ice, water, fire, rock and plant

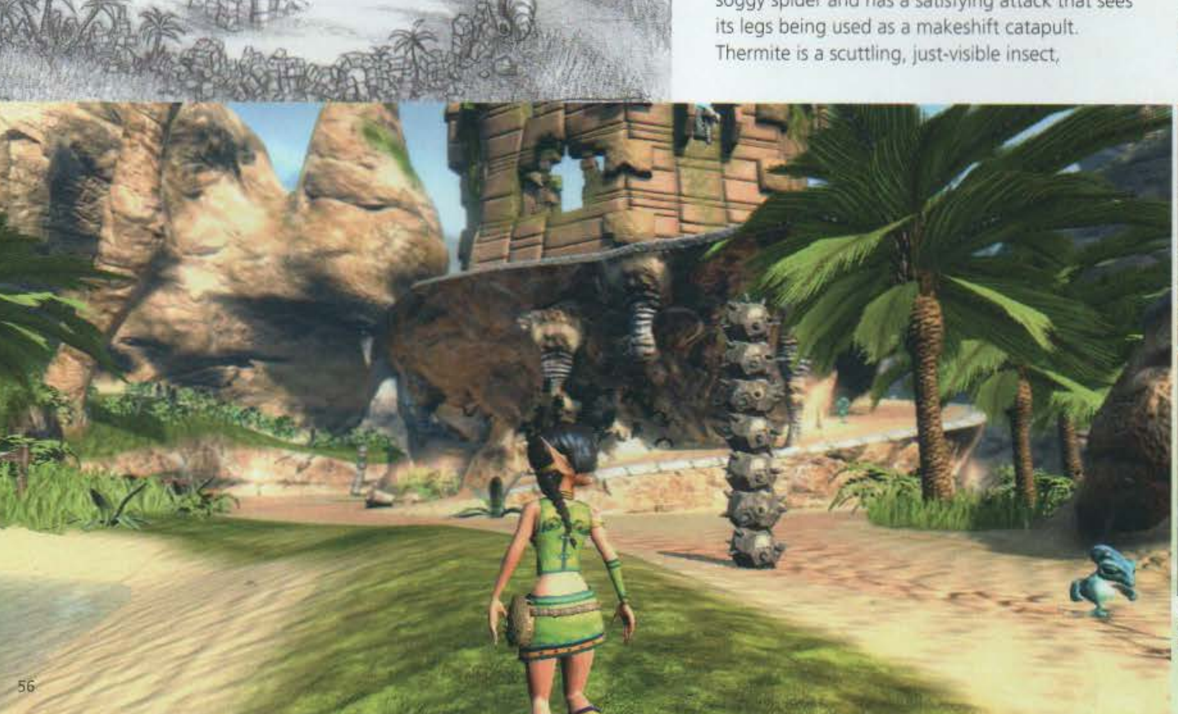
want from them. Although we're using professional actors, we can still get that Rare signature in there." Indeed, a small, gremlin-like creature located in the Enchanted Kingdom – Kameo's home territory – is described as a 'Jimmy Tarbuck impersonator'. Another prospective fear squashed, then.

The game's most humanoid race – its fairies, which include Kameo herself, the kidnapped family she's trying to rescue and her nemesis Kalus – are perhaps the blandest, but there's no shortage of vivid characters. Such as oracle Mystic, a bonier and more twisted relative of *Starfox Adventures*' grating dino shopkeeper, minus the screeching. Or the podgy winged creatures that pootle around the Enchanted Kingdom tending to its fire lamps, who make up just a few of the 120 NPCs present in the very first area of the game's opening section. And two of the game's biggest stars are, fittingly, leads: Flex and Thermite. Water and fire creatures respectively, the former is a beautifully animated octopus-alike that wouldn't look out of place in Super Mario's sunshine, moves like a soggy spider and has a satisfying attack that sees its legs being used as a makeshift catapult. Thermite is a scuttling, just-visible insect,



stooped over from the load resting on its back, one that's very probably around 50 times its own weight: a lava-encrusted cannon capable of shooting chunks of fiery mortar that send groups of enemies scattering like the splashes of a stomped puddle.

These creatures that Kameo depends upon – known as Warriors – begin their life as sprite babies, needing to be rescued from the Shadow Trolls that hold them prisoner. Each sprite is liberated by a confrontation with these monsters, boss-like scraps where Kameo needs







***Kameo*'s accent on action may seem to put it in a crowded genre even within Xbox 360's launch line-up, but this has been the plan for the game all along since the GC iteration**



Hidden talents



What with its relative quiet in terms of press releases, the hibernation of franchises such as *Perfect Dark*, and its infamously secure and remote Twycross studio, does Rare expect to be seen as reclusive? "I think things are changing," says Andreas, *Kameo*'s design lead. "We used to be in a situation where we would develop the products very quickly, get them out of the doors and let the games speak for themselves. Obviously when development times increase, you get into a situation where the products aren't rolling out as quickly, and so you're not in a position to be able to talk about them. I think things are changing now, though. We've been a little bit more open and more communicative with yourselves, for instance."

to harness the power of Lost Souls, apparitions that can be worn as a visor to see into the Shadow World and allow her to locate and attack her opponent. Rescued sprites are absorbed into Kameo, to be called upon as Warrior forms, whose attacks are assigned to the right and left triggers, and combinations of the two. Three Warriors can be mapped to the face buttons to quick-swap them, and their talents are upgraded by feeding them fruit, partly earned from subquests. There's nothing complex in this evolution, but that wasn't how it used to be: "The team did dabble with the idea of something more complicated, but decided to keep this aspect simple," says Andreas. "At one stage we allowed the player to catch and collect the sprites within the game's environments, and when you got control of them, you were able to run around and look for food to evolve them. We shortcut that as we felt it wasn't working well in the bigger picture, as we wanted it to be more action than adventure."

Other changes, though, are less a reduction and more an expansion, thanks to the extra power afforded by Xbox 360, such as the addition of a coop mode that can be played over Live or System Link. We play through the game's prologue with Stevenson and, while there's nothing that seems to require truly cooperative play in order to progress, the potential for tagteam combat – especially for speedy boss kills – is obvious. "Coop has come about because of Xbox 360," explains Andreas. "The game we had at the end of last year was a oneplayer experience, and that was it. On 360, we had some more time, and so we added elements that we wanted originally, but the machine didn't have enough power to do – for instance, the Battlefield."



The NPCs that litter the Enchanted Kingdom have their own jobs and roles to go about, which change throughout the game's day and night cycle. Some of them offer subquests that can reap fruit to be fed to *Kameo*'s Warrior forms in order to upgrade their attack skills. Bonus skins can be obtained for them, too, for those who achieve sufficiently high combo scores in combat

The potential for tagteam combat – especially for boss kills – is obvious

Kameo's Battlefield is the one of the easiest pegs for the game to hang its next-gen hat on, being rich in impressive numbers. It's a stage that acts as a link between key areas of the game, but is far from a glorified hub. Some 1,000 trolls greet the player when they first trot out into this expanse; an opening camera pan shows the immense scale of the imminent scrap, even if the effect is lessened due to each character displaying the same short animation. Although, it's hard to imagine it not being an inappreciable mess if this wasn't the case, such are the

Moving platforms



Kameo has skipped between three different formats over the years, sprouting on GameCube before moving across to Xbox and then up to 360 under Microsoft. Who do these shifts in destination put the most pressure on – coders, artists, designers or other? "I'm obviously biased," answers Tossell, "but programmers get the worst job, really, because of the short period of time between Xbox and 360 versions, plus all the new features – like Live coop – that we wanted." Andreas, meanwhile, offers a more general view: "The designers have it toughest to begin with, having to think about how to flex their creative muscle on a more powerful machine. It's then up to the art guys to create the visual fidelity for that machine, to up the ante, and create an experience that would be perceived as next-generation. And then it's down to the software guys to make it all work."



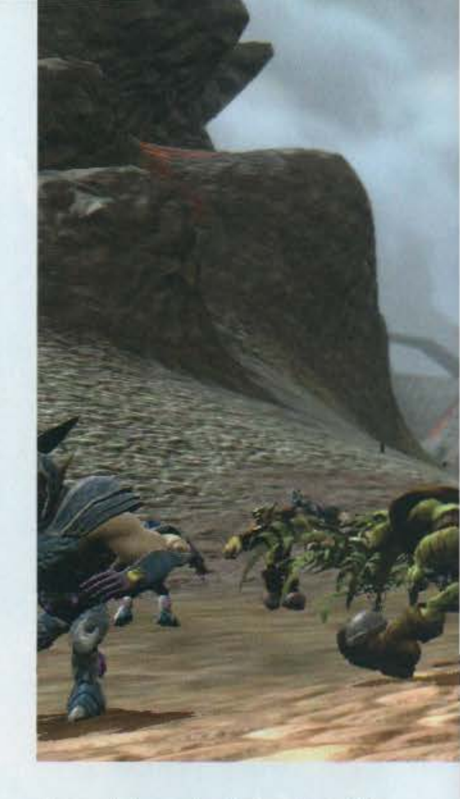




Played on a 360 devkit, *Kameo* boasts some pleasingly rapid loading times. That's because it's being run from the unit's hard drive, right? "Nope, it's running off a disc," confirms lead designer George Andreas

numbers of enemy troops present. On horseback or otherwise, Kameo engages these hordes to protect the shrines that are feeding power to the Enchanted Kingdom – fully visible in the sky above – and engage them she must. These battles were previously mooted to be an option, something for the player to deal with if they fancied earning themselves a bonus or two, but are now compulsory. Kameo's not alone, however: soon into her first battle, 1,000 elves join the fray to fight for good in an arena whose total population eventually reaches 5,000. Later skirmishes see enemy vehicles and other, larger creatures joining in, too.

Such an action-oriented experience may seem at odds with what appears to be a brightly coloured adventure game, but it is *Kameo*'s focus and has long been intended. There are three categories of award handed out during battle that wouldn't look out of place in *Mortal Kombat*: Brutal (for one-hit kills), Carnage (for continuous kills) and Frenzy (for speedy attacking). A point-scoring system is there to tally the player's performance, and to encourage combo imagination when using *Kameo*'s Warriors. Deep Blue, an aqua Warrior essential for swift underwater travel, can soak enemies in oil, which can be ignited by fire elemental Ash, exploding them instantly. An ice creature with a machine-gun's attitude to throwing snowballs, called 40 Below, can freeze an opponent, ripe for shattering from Rubble's rock attacks. Warrior Focus is a slow-mo mode that kicks in automatically once the player gets busy enough; although far from an original idea,



it's a perfect opportunity to quick-switch between Warriors and experiment with a more agile variety of attacks.

Bosses, too, offer up the kind of texture that will be essential for *Kameo* to play well. Fighting Lord Drok, a towering, steam-powered iron giant brandishing a just-as-giant hammer, requires the player to capture incendiary gremlins and fling them at Drok's body, before detonating them with a careful sniper shot. The visual quality in this battle with such a titan is something that Andreas likens to a Pixar movie, an opinion lent no end of weight by a game running in HD on a luxurious TV.

It's a point worth expanding – *Kameo* is perhaps the best possible advert for 360's HDTV capabilities, more than *PGR3*'s fanatical

The visual quality is something that Andreas likens to a Pixar movie







Coop shares *Halo*'s checkpoint teleports as a way of keeping players together. Whoever reaches the next waypoint first has their partner transported to them to keep things flowing. Players can damage one another as they play, but the true enjoyment's to be had from genuine cooperation in combat



Major Ruin is a rock-type Warrior who curls up into a spiked ball that can be boosted across gaps, up quarter pipes and through tunnels, much like *Metroid Prime*'s morph ball

appreciation of cities and auto erotica, more than *Dead Rising*'s zombie orgy, thanks mostly to one thing: colour. It's everywhere, blooming and gushing from every polygonal pore. With its richness and scale, it's a rainbow among the rampant shadows and intricately grimy textures of other action-oriented Xbox 360 titles. The Throne Room, a centrepiece within Kameo's Enchanted Kingdom homeland, is apparently often used by Microsoft whenever it wants to wow an audience: a large, circular room with a reflective floor, the throne itself sits beneath a tremendous shaft of light shining in through the room's window, casting an intense glow on the million or so particles that hover and drift through the air.

Above anything else, *Kameo* looks finished. For Andreas, it's been six years since a game he's worked on – *Donkey Kong 64* – was released. The following cliché is hard to resist, only because it's so apt: is it time to party like it's 1999? "I can't speak for the rest of the team, but it's getting to the point where people can soon buy the game, and hopefully appreciate it the way I do, and it feels good to be getting there. We were nearly there at the end of 2004, and then we heard the suggestion about moving over to a new platform. The instant response was: 'You've got to be joking!' But, after taking a step back, and literally in the space of a few hours, myself, Phil and Mark – it wasn't rocket science, really. You look at the market, look at 360 and the message that MS is keen to get across with 360 to broaden the market. A game like *Kameo* fits right into that philosophy."

How finished has each version of *Kameo* (see 'Moving platforms') been on the many formats on which the game has been mooted to appear? Andreas: "When we went to E3 with the GameCube version, we had worked on it for about four or five months. Nintendo wanted to show some product, and we had something that was quite advanced at the time, and so we showed it. When we took it across to Xbox, we took all the elements from the GameCube version and extracted the ones that weren't working, then evolved the game – it was about 80 per cent complete at the end of last year."

Six years and nigh on two generations of hardware passed as *Kameo* went through those guises. Has it been hard for the *Kameo* team – which itself must have undergone just as many transfers and iterations – to keep its perspective?

"It's helped us to focus even more, to be honest," reveals Andreas. "As we jumped from one platform to another we refined elements – I'm not using as that a pun, by the way – we took out areas we didn't feel were working well, or couldn't be pushed forward along with other areas of the game. It's also allowed us to fully realise everything we wanted to do with the game. It has been in development for a long time, so people perceive that you've been developing the game for that amount of time. To a degree you are, but every platform jump is an effective start from scratch – take all the assets from the previous machine, convert them over to work on the new machine and only *then* can you start creating content and begin to develop the game."

Rare won't be getting into the groove of producing an annual franchise, then? "You have to question whether it's our place to do something like that," comments **Phil Tossell**, *Kameo*'s lead programmer. "We're a firstparty, we should be innovating and producing the products that other publishers hopefully aspire to." Andreas has plenty to add, not least a surprising revelation about Rare's practices as a studio: "With something like *Kameo*, if you were starting from scratch, it would take a good development team three years anyway, such is its enormity. To knock something out like *Kameo* every year is not going to happen.

"The other thing to consider, though, is the size of the teams. The teams that produce the current annual franchises on the market, I suspect they'd be 40, 50 probably 60 strong or more. With *Kameo*, for the best part of its production, we've probably had around 16-20 people, maximum, up until the beginning of this year, where we have around 30 people. It's always been the way." With regard to teams, and if only for the sake of prompting a cheap jibe, how does it feel to have to share *Kameo*'s overdue debut with *Perfect Dark Zero*? "I feel sorry for them for having to compete with us," says Stevenson, dryly. As a parting shot, is there anything the *Kameo* team would like to say to those who've grown disillusioned with Rare over the past few years? The response couldn't be less bitter: "All I want is for people to see *Kameo* for what it is, not for where it comes from," says Tossell. "For them to just play it and enjoy it. I really hope they will."





The lead *Kameo* trio (left to right): programmer Phil Tossell, artist Mark Stevenson and game designer George Andreas



TITLE: **THE WITCHER**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **CD PROJEKT RED STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **2006**

HEX AND VIOLENCE

Polish distributor CD Projekt has handled many of the PC's most successful and memorable roleplaying games. Now, it wants to make its own

For a young developer's first full-scale project, *The Witcher* has been presented with no lack of assured bluster – from the 'RPG Redefined' tagline to a German Games Convention showing adorned by the brutalised figure of an executed elf.

"It was covered in artificial blood, and that was starting to attract flies," recalls project manager **Bartosz Gulik**. The spectacle predictably mortified one of the event organisers, but equally predictably proved a huge draw for showgoers. "We've got something even better planned for next time."

That's a prospect for Games Convention 2006 to consider with both dread and anticipation, as CD Projekt has become expert at channelling its own confident momentum. Founded by two friends in 1994 to import PC games into their native Poland, it has grown into the country's most respected distribution and localisation house, cutting its teeth during the golden years of Interplay and BioWare's PC RPG output. The relationship with Interplay would in turn create CD Projekt's internal development studio in 2002, formed to produce a PC port of *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* on an 'If you make it, you can distribute it' challenge. Though work on the port was shelved when Interplay's decline became terminal, co-founder and creative director **Michal Kicisnki** saw it more as an opportunity than a setback: "Since we already had four programmers, we decided: 'OK, we'll make our own action-RPG'."

It's tempting to believe that's the abridged version of their decision to charge headlong into the most gruelling genre to develop for, but Kicinski wasn't intending to start from scratch: "The obvious concept for us was to base the game in [Andrzej] Sapkowski's world, as we're huge fans and saw it was a perfect setting." A Polish national treasure (see 'Background reading'), Sapkowski's works are set in the exposed underbelly of high fantasy, where elves and dwarves live in squalor as oppressed minorities, and grasping human fiefdoms fall prey both to each other and to hungry supernatural threats. An order of alchemy-altered monster hunters, the Witchers, ply their grim trade from town to town, with one of their more notorious figures – and the game's leading man – being the brooding albino Geralt of Rivia. For all the clichés it retreads or subverts, Sapkowski's territory is a moral no-man's land, a Witcher's actions guided by profession rather than altruism, and the best ending that can be hoped for a bittersweet one. "I don't know if it's because he's Polish, or just his general view of things," muses Gulik.

SAPKOWSKI'S WORKS ARE THE UNDERBELLY OF HIGH FANTASY, WHERE ELVES AND DWARVES LIVE IN SQUALOR

After experimenting with in-house technology, the team turned to BioWare to licence *Neverwinter Nights'* Aurora engine, a choice made for the backend structure to support the RPG and story elements rather than its basic visuals. As *The Witcher* is stubbornly singleplayer, the graphical reworking this allowed, and demanded, has left it

Though Geralt must face monsters alone, there's a wealth of strategy to be learned from other NPCs beforehand. It's possible to charge in unprepared, but not advisable

BACKGROUND READING

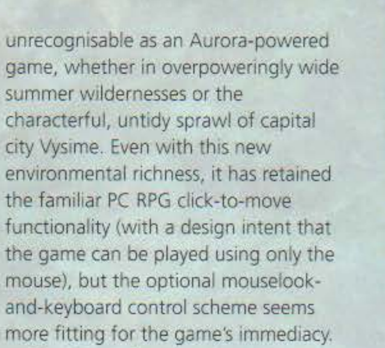
Andrzej Sapkowski's career path describes a similar success story to that of CD Projekt: his writing career started in a Polish fantasy magazine competition, with his first Wiedzmin (it can also be translated as 'Hexer', though Kicinski prefers the sound of 'Witcher') short story published in 1986. His snowballing popularity with readers, even if it only claimed third place in the competition, saw it followed by further short stories in the early '90s, and ultimately a cycle of four novels. Enormously successful in Poland for his writing style as much as his storytelling – "I didn't know the Polish language could be used in the way he did," Kicinski recalls of his first encounter – the stories have been translated to similar acclaim across Europe, but to date have not appeared in English – bar an appearance by the first short story in the anthology A Polish Book Of Monsters (translations by Michael Kandel).

However, British and American prints of the novels and short story collections, respectively, are finally underway – which would be fortuitous for *The Witcher*'s western release. Sapkowski's text remains punchy and playful in English, though it seems unlikely that his work will enter the school curriculum – as we learn the original has in conversation with various Warsaw residents, all of whom know The Witcher, if not necessarily treasure it: "Fantasy's written for boys, really, isn't it?" shrugs one student.



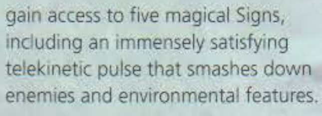


Two men on a mission: project manager Bartosz Gulik (top) and creative director Michal Kicisnki



unrecognisable as an Aurora-powered game, whether in overpoweringly wide summer wildernesses or the characterful, untidy sprawl of capital city Vysime. Even with this new environmental richness, it has retained the familiar PC RPG click-to-move functionality (with a design intent that the game can be played using only the mouse), but the optional mouselook-and-keyboard control scheme seems more fitting for the game's immediacy.

That immediacy has also seen *Neverwinter*'s turn-based combat replaced with realtime action: "The style of the game, the visuals and the way it flows, doesn't lend itself to pausing the action then unpausing to see what happens," explains Gulik. Combat is initiated by clicking on an opponent to launch an opening swing, augmented by freely switchable strong, swift or group fighting styles, and following a rhythmic sequence of click prompts allows combination strikes. We ask if this hasn't simply changed *Diablo*'s one-click mechanic to a three-click one, always favouring the strongest attack, but the team intends to add optional 'power-up' effects at each combo branch, such as stunning or knockdown moves, encouraging strategising in the fray. Geralt will also



gain access to five magical Signs, including an immensely satisfying telekinetic pulse that smashes down enemies and environmental features.

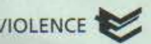
Though the combat engine is solid, it's still a risky proposition when the PC RPG audience is suspicious, or even openly hostile, toward action-based combat. "The games that are the most intricate don't necessarily do the best, and we realised even within the PC market – where the user profile is... calmer, I guess – that the elements of simplicity and action can be positives rather than negatives," Gulik reasons. "There are people, I'm sure, who'll disagree: 'If it's not turn-based, it's not a real RPG', but in order to get a broader audience excited by RPGs in the current gaming age, you can't rely on them to have the patience or the attention span for 200-page manuals."

"We still have elements to attract the hardcore RPG fans to the game,"





The colours of the sky may look tranquil, but not all monsters wait until night to emerge – one ghost materialises only at noon. Moments such as the sun re-emerging after a storm are disarmingly beautiful





Geralt fights with showy but tangibly lethal motion-captured flourish. Heavy blows will leave gaping wounds, and sword blades glitter with enemies' blood or ichor



Geralt carries a steel sword to deal with human opponents and a silver sword for monstrous ones; each blade has an individual skill tree to build as Geralt levels up. Similarly straightforward trees govern his statistics and Signs, each with a clearly set path of increasing power or building side-skills



adds Kicinski, "like the alchemy system, which is quite complex, or the non-linear quests, so hopefully they'll forgive us."

Taking a design cue from seminal PC RPG *Fallout* (Kicinski hopes *The Witcher* will be viewed as a medieval spiritual successor of sorts), all of the game's quests will offer multiple solutions, so that no play style or character build will be unable to progress the storyline. It's an important aspect not just for player choice, but because Gulik feels it will negate the need to pad out the game's running time with material unrelated to the story: "The idea of doing all those little sidequests is strange and silly – 'The world's falling apart, but I need you to get me a cup of tea from the herbalist'." If nothing else, such a quaint scenario would be out of place in *The Witcher*'s society: interactions are steeped in mercenary attitudes, with most characters susceptible to some combination of bribery, strong-arming or sexual desire.

The latter leads to an aspect as likely to be seized upon by the gaming press as the previous revelation that any character in the game, no matter their importance, can be slain – Geralt will have the chance to become intimately familiar with much of the female cast. After deliberation over how to portray this in the least crass manner – no notches on sword hilts, then – it was decided to award a lasciviously illustrated Tarot card for each encounter. It's a difficult balancing act when even Gulik admits the RPG audience is "little boys, and men who are little boys," but he's adamant that *The Witcher*'s eroticism will be integral rather than awkward. "We benefit there from the stories of Sapkowski, because Geralt is... sought-after," he explains. "There will be jealousy, sexual situations that affect which path the story proceeds down, so you'll have to make careful decisions about how to respond – it's not just titillation, just collecting all the cards."

"THERE WILL BE JEALOUSY, SEXUAL SITUATIONS THAT AFFECT WHICH PATH THE STORY PROCEEDS DOWN"

The Witcher's unflinching violence, too, is intended to be a product of its environment as much as an opportunity to watch lopped limbs curl bloody arcs in its slow-motion finishing moves. Quarrels with human antagonists are quick to start, but can be settled with fists instead of blades – though Geralt fights at a disadvantage without a sword in hand. Perhaps more difficult to convey, though, will be the sense that this is a world where a moral compass may not find a reading, when even the RPGs best regarded for their handling of morality do so in an obvious and binary fashion.

"We approach it more along the lines of 'piss them off' or 'don't piss them off' rather than 'good choice', 'bad choice'," says Gulik. "So choices result from your interactions with each character, rather than whether you want to play a good or evil role."

Kicinski continues: "In general, there's no absolute good and evil with our reputation systems. You can behave like a good citizen, and be treated well by guards, but that doesn't mean you're a good person – what if the king who made the laws you obey is a tyrant? Or the inhuman races: some see them as terrorists, others that they're fighting for their freedom. We're trying to balance it so that there are no easy choices."

"All your choices will affect the overall course of the story, but you don't necessarily get the security of knowing you're going to be a good person when you get to the end of it." Gulik concludes.

In fact, you may not necessarily have the security of knowing that





Despite still being built from Aurora 'modules', requiring a load between areas, *The Witcher*'s world is dense; landmarks in an adjoining module can be seen on the horizon of the current one

...For some it is just a job

For some it is a deadly danger...

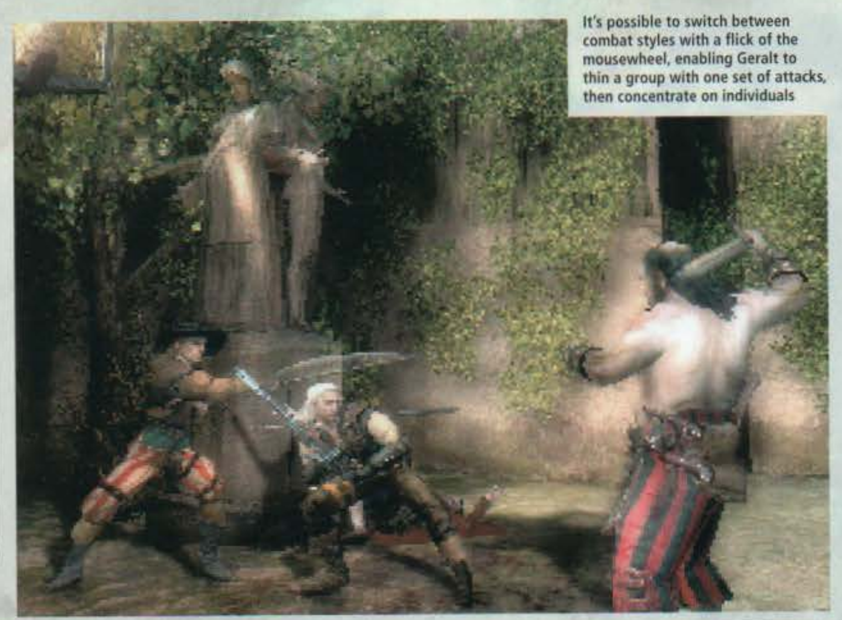


Geralt is the person the world thinks he is at the story's conclusion. The team's solution to introducing character growth elements into an established character's template, and to aid those picking up his adventures for the first time, is to fall back on a classic RPG device: Geralt begins the game as an amnesiac. Interestingly, this is an improvement from his state at the conclusion of the novels, in which he is killed – a major plotline of the game is to discover exactly who (or what) this Geralt is, answered in one of three possible endings. This final judgement is based on the entire path players have taken through the game, not in the final act chokepoint of some recent titles, as Gulik pointedly notes: "It's not decided in the last minutes by a conversation choice."

There's a year of development time ahead to thread these mysteries through the game's scores of environments and hundreds-strong cast; then there's the daunting testing regime to ensure one element *The Witcher* won't share with the Black Isle classics is a lengthy bug list. While CD Projekt's relationship with BioWare is officially one of technical support, it benefits from the fatherly advice of the west's most respected RPG house – one such suggestion spurring the team's growth to full development numbers, as Kicinski recounts with a grin: "We made a presentation to them in 2004: 'We have 16 people on the team, and we're ready to do this game!' [Laughs.] They told us: 'Guys, you're going to need about 50 people for this kind of project'."

Yet in other aspects the team was already well prepared – this is, after all, the game they've always wanted to make, in a genre they love and the


By day, Vysime bustles with merchants and thieves; by night other professions emerge, all under the (blind, for the right price) eye of the watch. It displays the character that made *Thief* so memorable


It's possible to switch between combat styles with a flick of the mousewheel, enabling Geralt to thin a group with one set of attacks, then concentrate on individuals



WHAT'S YOUR POISON?

Elixirs form a vital part of a Witcher's pre-battle arsenal, allowing Geralt to temporarily boost his senses or abilities. Lethal to an unaltered metabolism, elixirs only poison Geralt, indicated menacingly by a cloud of gently spiralling red sun-spots. Nearly imperceptible at first but thickening as the toxicity builds, it's finally joined by a thundering heartbeat and flash-out effect, at which point it's possible for Geralt to lose consciousness, or worse, as his system becomes overloaded.

To recover from the side effects requires a bout of meditation, with the intention of changing the standard all-you-can-drink potion dynamic to one of careful preparation. "We still have health elixirs that restore your vitality – but they poison you too," Gulik grins.

Elixirs must be created by the player from a mixture of alcohol and reagents harvested from monsters. Fighting with a secondary weapon – a butcher knife is suggested – rather than the customary silver sword will leave more undamaged materials for alchemy.

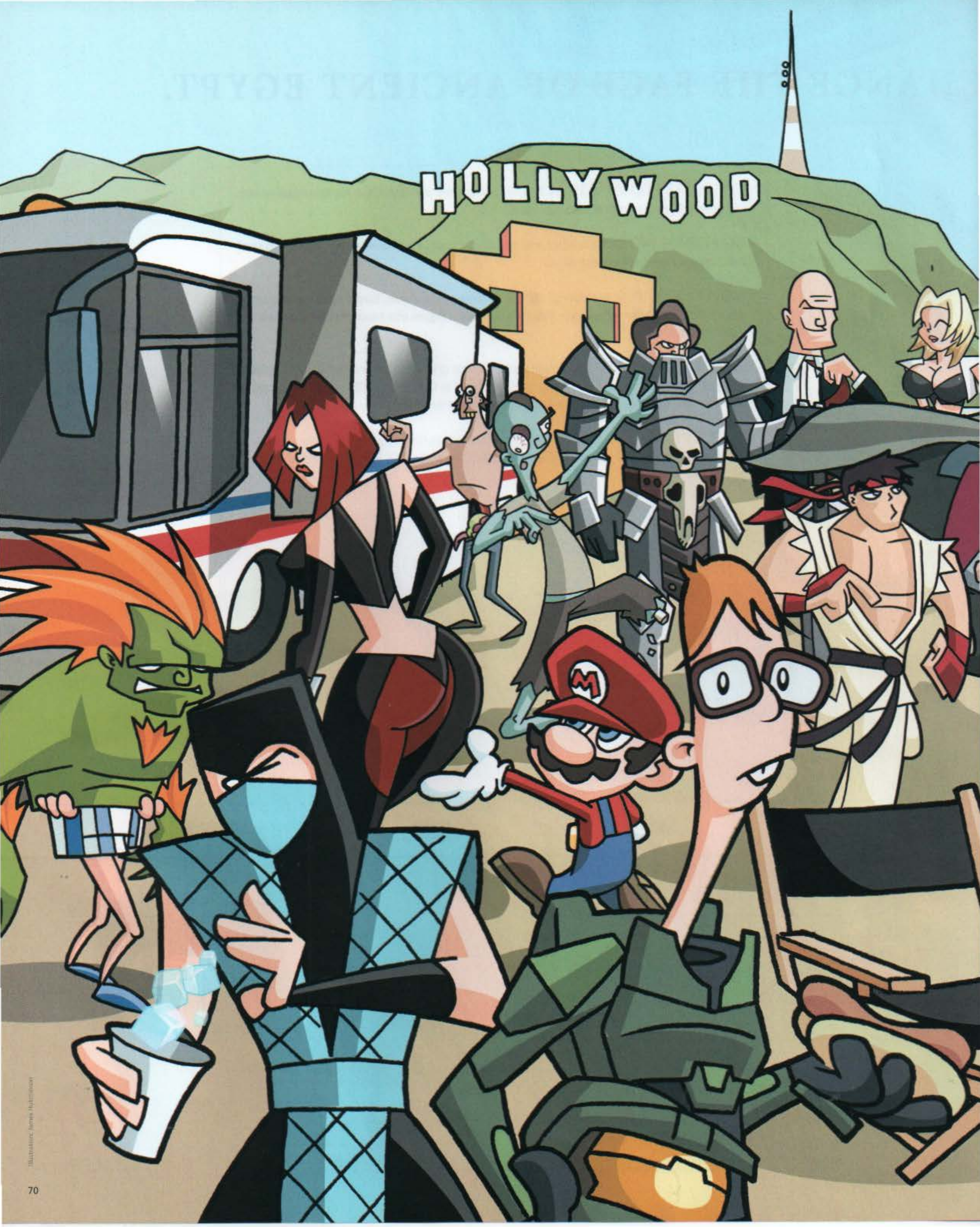


"WE DON'T WANT TO END UP WITH A GREAT GAME THAT NO ONE WANTS TO PLAY BECAUSE IT'S TOO DARK"

universe that inspired them. Self-funding has protected *The Witcher* from early publishing deals that would exert focus-tested creative control (a recurring theme seems to be removal of the sexual elements, though the graphic violence is excused) but there's still a question of how the audience they're seeking will take to its antiheroic fantasy. "We don't want to end up with a great game that no one wants to play because it's too dark," Gulik agrees, "so we will be looking at that very carefully – with the public, with betas, with other sources of feedback, to get an idea of whether it can appeal to a broader audience even with this darker subtext."

"It won't be so bleak that you'll play it through then want to commit suicide," assures Kicinski. "*Planescape: Torment* had trouble selling because it was so dark and so strange, so for the US we'll try to stress the familiar fantasy elements – dragons, elves and dwarves. And if that catches their interest, then as they play they can discover that it goes deeper."

The Witcher's blurb claims that it's less of a fairytale than typical RPG fantasy, but in some ways that's more a statement on how sanitised fairytales have become: this is a true eastern European fairytale, deep and black, where superstitions have teeth and quick wits are more valuable than virtue. With the RPG market still ploughing a familiar, but ever-decreasing furrow, it's also a fairytale worth believing in.


HOLLYWOOD
M



SCREEN PLAY

Just what is it about Hollywood and videogames? If only it was a question as simple as all that...

Videogame movie adaptations – what an odd relationship we have with thee. We give you our trust, and in return get a House Of The Dead that features a romantic interlude but no house, and a Resident Evil that has more time for rebellious computers than it does for reanimated corpses. As entertaining as you often are, you're habitually unfaithful, and happy to offend so long as we reach inside our pockets in the hope that you won't.

Why, we ask, has such an account of cinema's treatment of games (and indeed gamers) become so popular and so vividly expressed? Why, also, does the unfortunate situation it describes persist in the way that it does? Is it because studios forever wary of the unknown quantity can still make marketing sense out of bankable videogame IP bred with reliable Hollywood formulae? Or is it perhaps that when a moviemaker expresses their love of a videogame to secure its licence, they're really eulogising little more than its underlying premise – one that when stripped from its interactive form and dismantled into constituent parts is just a classic genre movie adapted once already?

What follows is a search for answers: an overview of all those notorious adaptations, as well as the other movies for which videogaming in general was concept enough. The key figures presently charged with bridging the two industries will have their say, as together we try to explain the peculiar mathematics and motivations behind gaming's tallest tales.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #1
TRON (1982)

A Disney masterclass in the fledgling art of computer animation – passed over for a Visual Effects Oscar because it 'cheated' by using computers – Tron delivers a misleading representation of computer programming. Excited children grew up into the coders of today, only to realise the only Disc Of Death is the one you get back from QA with a list of over 1,000 bugs.

SUPER MARIO BROS (1993)


© Hollywood Pictures

BUDGET: $48 million
PLOT: What the textbooks missed about the meteorite that obliterated the dinosaurs: it also ripped open a parallel universe, where the terrible lizards live on in evolved bipedal form. Two down-at-heel brothers stumble into this dino dimension, and cross paths with the mayor of Dinohattan, King Koopa.
STAR POWER: Danny DeVito was off doing more important things (Look Who's Talking Now among them), leaving Hollywood's *other* small, round standby, Bob Hoskins, to do the Mario. Dennis Hopper was an odd choice for the kids – they were likely more excited about Roxette wailing over the end credits.
GAME LOYALTY: Number five in an Amazon list of 'embarrassing movies' – films people are too ashamed to rent in person – Super Mario Bros squandered a licence that cost millions. The dystopian Dinohattan (designed by Blade Runner's art director) is a world away from the dayglo Mushroom Kingdom, Hopper sleepwalks his role as a human reptile, Luigi lacks a moustache and Mario – the master of a million platforms – is afraid of heights. As with Bambi (number four in that Amazon chart), cinemas filled with the sound of children gently weeping.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: Only a handful of brief cameos (a Bullet Bill's bar sign, real clockwork Bob-ombs) remind you there's a Nintendo property buried beneath My First Blade Runner. But the most notable moment was probably the point where the movie gained a *fourth* director.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "Anything's possible, Mario – you just gotta believe!"
THE RESULT: The Washington Post might have raved, praising the Goombas as 'the best movie heavies since the flying monkeys in The Wizard of Oz', but SMB flopped, pulling in just $20 million in the US.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #2
NIGHTMARES (1983)

Tron is flipped on its head for The Bishop Of Battle, the third tale in a quartet of horror stories. A young Emilio Estevez plays the videogame 'whizkid' who sweats his way to level 13 of a talking vector machine – but simply gets trapped inside the game for his trouble. Not for collectors who'd like to avoid seeing a whole arcade full of classic coin-ups go up in smoke.

STREET FIGHTER (1994)


© Columbia TriStar Film Distributors

BUDGET: Around $35 million
PLOT: Confusing. M Bison, dictator of a country called Shadoloo, is up against Guile and his Allied Nations forces (including assistant Cammy), as well as Chun Li – a reporter – and her crew (E Honda and Balrog). Now cut to Ryu and Ken, a comedy pair mixed up with the wily Sagat. Dhalsim is taken hostage by Bison and... where were we?
STAR POWER: Jean-Claude Van Damme's star was in the ascendant, and Kylie Minogue gave the tabloids something to talk about (and the Washington Post the chance to describe her as 'the worst actress in the English-speaking world'). Street Fighter was also, famously, Raul Julia's final film.
GAME LOYALTY: There was a story, of sorts, to *Street Fighter II* and its myriad offshoots. But the movie chose to take a cannon to the canon, and some *SF* lovers still tremble when they recall Charlie morphing into Blanka. A few fireballs and a Hado-ken! or two – or even just Chun-Li in a blue rather than red outfit – would have worked wonders.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: Julia's crazed M Bison is a treat; Van Damme's constipated attempts at dramatic timing would make even Shatner wince. But for sheer cheek, the final seconds – JCVD and crew striking the winning poses from *SFII* as Bison's stronghold crumbles – take the biscuit.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "I'm the repo man, Bison... and you're out of business!"
THE RESULT: Grossed $100 million worldwide to date. The New Yorker's thoughts: '[Steven E de Souza] wrote at his usual rate of one good gag per 50... five editors couldn't save his ragged action'.



MARS ATTACKS

It's hardly the most highbrow adaptation, but Universal's Doom proves that there's hard work involved in playing it dumb

"When most people play *Doom*," declares Doom movie producer **John Wells**, "they turn out the lights and close the curtains – it's a particularly good game to play at two in the morning. It pulls you into a world that's very cinematic."

As you look for an indication as to how the somewhat scarred profile of gaming adaptations might evolve over the coming months and years, there are few better directions in which to look than that of Universal Pictures' monster-budget take on id's iconic FPS. The production offers no false hopes – it could spawn the most mindless celluloid shooter in history and, so long as it keeps the trigger pressed flush against the grip, will remain both faithful and fulfilling. As rudimentary as its action is, however, it's more than just a game of soldiers.

"We went through a period of designing the characters," explains special effects supervisor **Jon Fahret**, "and we had to sit back, look at it and think: 'What's the best way of doing this?' In some cases, we knew we had to put guys in suits, and then we had a CG component that took them further – adding heads and body parts, etc. And then we knew that in some cases we'd have totally CG characters and environments. We took our overall effects budget and divided it between make-up effects, creature design and the visual-effects division – I have to say it was quite a bit of money. Universal put a good chunk o' change into this."

Interestingly, though much as been made of the film's wide spectrum of effects, it's one of an increasing number of event pictures that are quick to emphasise their restraint. "I know that The Rock was actually saying there was no CG in the movie," recalls Fahret, "which isn't entirely true. I'd have to say 50/50 – a good split, I think. The temptation, of course, is to say, 'Well, now we have this big budget and this rendering power, we can see every aspect of the monsters'. But whenever we fell into that we failed. We had to really pay attention to the fact that we needed to light this with that edgy quality. So you have a black frame and then you have a bright area within it – that bright area has



Effects supervisor John Fahret reveals that *Doom 3*'s evaporating enemies experience an altogether bloodier demise in cinemas. "We wanted it to remain real throughout," he says, "and there was a layer of reality that just blew away if the creatures blew away"







As accurate as its sets are with their identically themed VDUs and recognisable architecture, it remains to be seen whether Doom will be able (or willing) to embrace the game's unremittent darkness. Given Hollywood's rather tiring penchant for strobe effects, we sincerely hope it does

an intense detail but you can still play to the black frame surrounding it."

When compared to the hardware behind these effects, of course, the specs of an enthusiast gaming PC may as well be scrawled in crayon. Did a degree of artistry have to be employed to bring id's original designs up to scratch? "Certainly. When we started, id provided some CG models, but very basic ones because they tend to map very intense textures on to more simplified shapes. In our case, we had to create very complicated models because of the lighting requirements. It's like taking a clay sculpture that's smooth and putting in all the veins and zits."

Sharing the task of giving life to id's creature-house was Stan Winston Studios – something that should catch the ears of those aficionados who, having savoured genre favourites such as Aliens, Predator and Jurassic Park, would have recognised the same sleight-of-hand in movies such as The Relic, Congo and Lake Placid. Did Stan himself play a part?

"Well, actually, no," says Fahret. "We used SWS, and the fellow who runs that is John Rosengrant. Working with them, though, was a total joy. John and I made a decision long before this show even had wheels that when we got involved, we would work very tightly together. I've always wanted to not just do total CG, and he's always wanted to not just do total make-up, so we decided to mix them so that whenever we were shooting creatures – whether it was a make-up creature or a CG creature – we pretty much involved each other in the process."

And what of the story that's tasked with springing these imps and cacodemons from the shadows? Even at its most verbose, *Doom III* still has a premise to make a Hammer film blush – one supplemented with little more than the catastrophic backstory recounted by its many PDAs. Is some narrative embellishment also on the cards? "I think more than embellish it," suggests Wells, "you have to create something that works without undermining what it is that you wanted to do in the first place – what the game was about. That's no easy task."

"There are multiple concepts of Hell," adds **Karl Urban**, the New Zealand-born actor who leads Doom's cast as player-character turned movie protagonist, John Grimm, "and in this film, the human soul is really the portal to it. Essentially, once these people get put into this situation, it brings out either the good or bad in them, so I believe that on a multitude of levels, it's very faithful to the concept."

"YOU HAVE TO CREATE SOMETHING WITHOUT UNDERMINING WHAT YOU WANTED TO DO IN THE FIRST PLACE – WHAT THE GAME WAS ABOUT"

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #3

THE LAST STARFIGHTER (1984)

The magical escapist fantasy coin-op junkies were waiting for, with young Alex Rogan's arcade skills making him the galaxy's last hope against Emperor Xur. Arriving just in time to see the console industry collapse in on itself – Atari's *The Last Starfighter* videogame eventually morphed into 1986's *Solaris* – it's since been turned into an off-Broadway musical.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #4

HOLLYWOOD ZAP (1986)

A kid goes in search of the ultimate videogame player – who's earned his reputation playing, unusually, Sega's *Zaxxon*. The usual bad taste from the Troma factory, straining for laughs with transsexual nuns and 'a drunken lunatic', but still well worth tracking down for the many shots of seedy, smoky arcades of the '80s.

DOUBLE DRAGON (1994)



BUDGET: Not much
PLOT: Los Angeles, waterlogged by earthquakes, has become New Angeles, where gangs rule the streets at night and cops are more than happy to let them. Amid the chaos, tycoon Kogo Shuko seeks the second half of an amulet throbbing with dark magic. Unbeknownst to goofy kick-punching brothers Billy and Jimmy Lee, they've got it.
STAR POWER: Non-entities Scott Wolf (26) and Mark Dacascos (30) were odd picks for Double Dragon's teen heroes, but nubile Who's The Boss? star Alyssa Milano was just the thing for an audience of excitable pubescent boys. The Kogo Shuko role was filled by a bearded T1000.
GAME LOYALTY: It was never likely to ape the game especially closely (running to the right and kicking punks probably isn't Oscar-winning material), but Double Dragon's martial arts farcery is confusingly aimless for fans and *DD* newcomers alike – the height of paradoxical confusion comes when a *Double Dragon* coin-op is placed in the background of one scene. At least that girl with the whip turned up.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: The appearance of a mutated Abobo, almost drowning in prosthetic fat, is a shock, but it's his later fate – being force-fed spinach by Milano – which marks the exact point that the directors seem to have lost their minds entirely.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "If we don't jack in, we'll all be vapour!"
THE RESULT: A paltry $2 million in the US. Yet Kevin Thomas, a critic who has been described as having 'an unerring capacity to love any film that's simply in focus', found Double Dragon a 'clever adaptation of the popular videogame with awe-inspiring special effects!'

"It was scary," the actor continues. "The attention to detail was 100 per cent on the button, right down to the most myopic detail – the computer graphics on the displays, the shapes of the corridors, the grilles and the lighting. Everything was faithful and that's something that gave me a lot of confidence."

So there were trepidations when signing up to a production based on a videogame? "Yeah, sure," he replies. "There's no denying that there have been some crap game adaptations and you always have to think very carefully about the pros and cons of whichever project you undertake. Ultimately, the story and the character were too good to turn down: he's a reluctant antihero – a guy who's turned his back on his family's way of life, and a child of science intelligent enough to have gone down that road, but who chose to go elsewhere and blow shit up. Also, for me, this film was offering something unique and original – something I hadn't seen on film before."

What Urban refers to is something that, logically, has become known to the cast and crew as the 'FPS sequence' – a short, effects-driven homage to the game seen entirely through Grimm's eyes. "It's essentially a five-minute effects shot," reveals Fahret, "that contains stuntmen and make-up suits, CG environments and creatures – it's a real kluge. Half that sequence, with hundreds of processors, took over 20 days to render." It's when facts and figures such as these emerge that we're given a reminder of something that should be obvious, but is all too easily taken for granted when the cinema lights go down. Bringing those assets out of videocard pipelines and on to the big screen is no mere transferral from one digital format to another – the proximity of the two media may have reached the point where you can trace the outline, but it takes an artist to replicate and, in this case, fill in the detail. There must have been some apprehension when it came to honouring id Software's intricately crafted world. "Actually, it worked the other way round," contradicts Wells. "They had optioned the piece in the past and it hadn't come to fruition, so they were very nervous about putting years of work into it and it not becoming something they liked." Urban continues: "They visited the set and were extremely happy with what they saw – they had a great time. It must have been quite a kick for them to see their baby come to life, just as it was a kick for me to have been a fan of their games and now to see this three-dimensional UAC facility there that I could just rampage through."

Does Doom, then, with its behind-the-scenes balance of real and realtime, give its actors more to



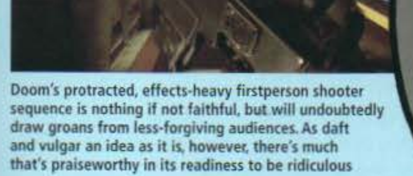
To portray its expanded ensemble of characters (who demonstrate the Aliens influence far less ashamedly than the games ever did), Doom has enlisted actors ranging from the famous down, including Karl Urban, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson and GamesMaster manslave Dexter Fletcher

"IT'S ESSENTIALLY A FIVE-MINUTE EFFECTS SHOT THAT CONTAINS STUNTMEN AND MAKE-UP SUITS, CG ENVIRONMENTS AND CREATURES"

work with than usual? "I think so," confirms Fahret. "When you do totally CG shows, the actor typically doesn't have anything – they have a guy running round with a tennis ball on a stick, which is me on most occasions. So we decided that to put actors like Brian Steele and Doug Jones – who you've seen in Hellboy and other such movies – in suits and give the actors something to work with, that's an enormous help. Dwayne – The Rock – says over and over again how helpful that was to him, that he could actually have monsters standing there looking at him."

As yet another sign of the game and movie worlds moving closer together, is this, we ask Wells, a sign of stronger, permanent bonds being formed between the two industries? Are we reaching the point where games and movies can truly work in tandem, sharing not only assets, but also human resources? "I think that's something that people have long spoken about but have never previously been able to do," he replies. "The more we create films that exist within the CG world – and there's not a significant difference between that and what's actually happening in the games world – the more people will start to cross over, particularly on the visual effects side. The more we start using CG – not just for monsters but for full-blown environments like the ones they were toying with on Sky Captain [And The World Of Tomorrow, Kerry Conran's throwback to the escapist serials of the '30s in which only its cast and a handful of props were live-action] – the closer we come to those fully CG game environments."

But is this a future, even if Doom satisfies its bloodthirsty audience and succeeds in bringing its world to life, in which videogame adaptations like it will have a place? As we're about to see, not all game movies leave their audience wanting more. Many, in fact, can leave even the most optimistic viewer praying to either their god, fate or more likely a certain German filmmaker for a world where games and movies never again cross paths. Is there a concern that the notoriety of previous adaptations, if upheld by those to come, will put an end to the studio system's desire to make them? "In America," Wells suggests, "where we've had some fall-off in both television and film viewership, a lot of that's been attributable to both the internet and to gaming. Much of that gaming audience tends to be young men right up until those in their thirties and forties, so I think the motion-picture business is going to always try and find things to drive that audience back into the theatres."



Doom's protracted, effects-heavy firstperson shooter sequence is nothing if not faithful, but will undoubtedly draw groans from less-forgiving audiences. As daft and vulgar an idea as it is, however, there's much that's praiseworthy in its readiness to be ridiculous

MORTAL KOMBAT (1995)



© New Line Cinema

BUDGET: Around $20 million
PLOT: Having racked up a triple hat-trick of Mortal Kombat tournament victories, Shang Tsung's Outworld warriors are just one win away from the right to stomp all over Earth. Sonya Blade, Johnny Cage and Liu Kang are the three mortals selected to fight humankind's corner in the tenth round.
STAR POWER: Director Paul W S Anderson had only bleak Belfast drama Shopping on his CV. With two big names out – Brandon Lee died before he could don the sunglasses of Johnny Cage; Cameron Diaz injured her wrist and lost the part of Sonya Blade to Miss Teen USA 1990 – it was left to Christopher 'Highlander' Lambert, of all people, to carry the movie.
GAME LOYALTY: Little more than a series of gravity-mocking fights too fast to make sense of, fought by warriors with one less dimension than the game's, and all hung on a gossamer-thin plot: Mortal Kombat couldn't have made fans happier. Nods to the games are plentiful (every Kombatant and most special moves were in, backdrops were lifted directly from *MK2*) and the toe-curling '90s humour is the perfect fit for the game's knowing daftness.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: The Harryhausen-esque Goro was (literally) jarring, but Christopher Lambert as Raiden gets our vote – his high camp firebolt-chucking is hilariously reminiscent of John Cleese's Tim the Enchanter in Monty Python And The Holy Grail.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "What I want to know is, if this Shang Tsung guy is so great, why's he got such a crummy-looking boat?"
THE RESULT: Grossed $23 million in its first weekend – the eighth-highest opener of '95. That despite the San Francisco Chronicle summarising the film as having 'everything a teenage boy could want… everything, that is, but an interesting plot, decent dialogue and compelling acting'.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #5
CLOAK & DAGGER (1984)

Atari coin-op *Agent X* was renamed to tie in with this remarkably grown-up kids' adventure, which sees an 11-year-old come into possession of an Atari 5200 cartridge crammed with top-secret data – then drive a car, wield a gun, and get locked in a car boot with the body of his dead friend. There's a lesson of some kind in there for all of us.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #6
THE WIZARD (1989)

Notorious 100-minute advertisement for Nintendo, featuring Fred Savage and his road trip to California. Awash with NES footage, it ended with a videogame tournament that gave wide-eyed younglings the first glimpse of *Super Mario Bros 3*. Moral for concerned parents: even that nice Wonder Years boy has aligned with the videogames satan.

MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION (1997)



© New Line Cinema

BUDGET: Around $30 million
PLOT: The bad guys proved themselves bad losers – tearing up the Kombat rulebook and illegally flinging open the gate between the Earth realm and the Overworld. Raiden marshalls his martials for (another) final battle: they've got just six days to close the portal and save all the humans.
STAR POWER: Paul W S Anderson and Christopher Lambert steered well clear this time, leaving Annihilation with precious little in the way of name. Looking back, we can all enjoy some early stuntwork by Ray 'Darth Maul' Park, but at the time Annihilation was little more than a 91-minute get-together for some over-sincere TV actors.
GAME LOYALTY: With $122 million under its belt, MK made the mistake of taking itself seriously. The carefree larks are gone, and in their place a tiresome conveyor belt of fighters – each good for a few slaps in front of a blue screen, before being carted off to make way for the next Kontender. Star and choreographer Robin Shou throws in some decent wirework, but with dreadful acting and no Johnny Cage – he's bumped off in the seventh minute – it all falls on the spikes.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: Thousands of young boys came of age during the Sonja vs Milena mud-wrestling scene, but Annihilation careers off the rails (almost literally) with the Kombatants pelting about in a high-speed version of a Gladiators Atlasphere.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "What closes can also open again."
THE RESULT: Grossed a mortally wounding $44 million worldwide. Still: "An eight-year-old walking out of the theater filed this review: 'That was the bomb!'" (Boston Phoenix).

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #7

THE LAWNMOWER MAN (1991)

The first movie to capitalise on the dread and excitement whipped up by the promise of a virtual reality-soaked future, this would be the first and last time low-budget CGI psychedelia would be blamed for transforming a humble gardener into a digital killer. You can be sure Pierce Brosnan doesn't talk about this one much.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #8

ARCADE (1993)

Teenagers are swallowed up by a virtual reality game where all that's required to play is "two quarters – and your soul!" From notorious B-movie auteur Albert Pyun, this was held back from release for two years in order to update the special effects. It doesn't show. Bizarrely, screenwriter David Goyer graduated to create the screenplays for Blade and Batman Begins.

WING COMMANDER (1999)



BUDGET: Around $30 million
PLOT: It's 2654, and the Terran Confederation is fighting off the Kilrathi Empire, a feline alien race that proves cats really were up to something all along. Young soldiers Christopher Blair and Todd 'Maniac' Marshall take the fight to the Kilrathi in the TCS Tiger Claw – while Blair fights prejudice over his 'Pilgrim' heritage.
STAR POWER: Surprisingly high. At least you recognise Freddie Prinze Jr and Matthew Lillard from I Know What You Did Last Summer and Scream respectively, even if you're unlikely to be signing up for their fan clubs after this. And there's David Suchet, *really* trying to escape half a lifetime of Hercule Poirot typecasting.
GAME LOYALTY: Heavily influenced by gung-ho World War II epics, this makes the mistake of dragging the strong *Wing Commander* plotline in several unnecessary directions (not least with the Force-aping 'gift' of the Pilgrims). Ships cobbled together from actual WWII aircraft and space combat with radars and dialogue that mimics Das Boot aren't what fans were hoping for. Odd, considering game creator Chris Roberts himself is directing.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: The opening scene – an electrifying sequence of real news clips segueing into mock futuristic headlines – promises much. All hope is lost, though, when a fighter craft is pushed off a platform by a rolling bulldozer. In space, mind.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "Medic!"
THE RESULT: $11 million worth of takings in the US, helped along by the Star Wars Episode 1 trailer it ran with. "These actors, alas, are at the service of a submoronic script and special effects that look like a videogame writ large" – Roger Ebert.

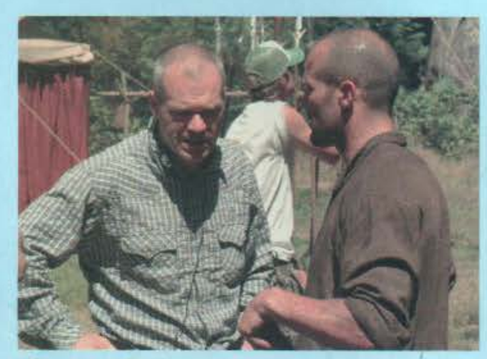
BOLLYWOOD

He's a one-man film industry who's made games his territory, and the adaptation of them a thankless task. Meet Dr Uwe Boll

Besides being the world's most prolific director of videogame adaptations, **Dr Uwe Boll** – director of 2003's House Of The Dead adaptation and Christian Slater vehicle Alone In The Dark – is a true online celebrity. He's possibly the only director of mainstream movies in the west to, allegedly, not only post on internet forums in defence of themselves, but do so under the guise of someone else. Such is the volume of allegations made against him by hysterical forumites (totalling some ten pages of topics alone on the IMDb) that even if the above were proven untrue, it would remain entirely believable. How, we ask, does a man entrusted with the fortunes of talent such as Ray Liotta and Burt Reynolds respond when, in one extreme instance, someone registers their name as a URL that only leads to the sentence: 'Please stop making films'?

"They should actually come on to the set and see what I'm doing," Boll responds. "They should talk with all the big-name actors that I'm working with and ask them how I work." And what of his reported suggestion that his movies' poor box office performances were largely the fault of "dumb" audiences? "I said that," he replies, "in reference to Alone In The Dark. It's not a stupid story like Freddy Versus Jason, and so maybe people simply didn't understand it. If my movies are so crappy, like people on the internet suggest, then why are over 100 countries buying them? Alone made over $30 million in DVD sales in the USA after it bombed in theatres. It was also a video hit in eastern Europe and the Middle East, while in Asia it was even a hit in theatres."

Not entirely convinced that the internet's bedroom pundits would be granted entry to a closed movie set to watch Boll operate, we decided to accept his second offer on their behalf. Rather than obtain a second-hand press statement from an actor, however, we thought it best to approach his creative partners instead. The subject of our interview – a high-ranking collaborator on one of Boll's recent projects who we'll



Director Uwe Boll with Snatch actor Jason Statham on the set of his latest movie, Dungeon Siege. Based on Gas Powered Games' PC RPG, it also (somehow) stars Burt Reynolds, Ray Liotta, Matthew Lillard, Claire Forlani, John Rhys-Davies, Leelee Sobieski and Ron Perlman



Two-time Boll collaborator Kristanna Loken, who you'll remember from the third Terminator movie, takes the lead in the director's upcoming adaptation of *Bloodrayne*. Those expecting an enthralling plot might want to look elsewhere (unlike those expecting breasts)

refer to simply as **X** – spoke under the express condition that they remain anonymous. How then, we asked, *does* Boll work? "I would definitely say that Dr Uwe Boll is a professional at what he does," says X. "As to *what* he does, however, that's a different question. Among professionals here in Hollywood, it's widely known that Uwe has rather, shall we say, curious ways of doing business. Talking shit about 'talent' like Tara Reid openly and with pride, comparing himself to Spielberg and Mel Gibson in self-aggrandising press releases, and calling up leading talent agents and offering to hook them up with deals if *they* pay *him* – only Uwe Boll is capable of going there."

Surely, though, a man whose latest effort is apparently so well produced that it's beyond criticism must have something in his repertoire? "If the man used his enviable business skills to finance projects to be directed, written and performed by actual talent – and God knows that would be almost everyone but him – then I'm sure he'd be surprised as to how much more money he could make," says X.

"Ultimately, I don't think the man really cares about movies or their quality. His mind is strictly focused on standardised business mechanisms and formulae. Occasionally, the world forces him to back up his sad lack of creative skills and integrity, but I doubt his investors (dentists and lawyers alike) back home have time – or care – to read the unanimous rants and horrid reviews in international magazines. In his world, money and bullshit walk hand in hand. Oh, and I almost forgot: besides Ron Howard, he's the only guy to give Clint Howard a job. Call it a social service."

It would be improper to suggest that the opinions of X and, indeed, of other more vocal opponents of Boll should be considered the final word on his brand of videogame adaptation, just as it'd be foolish to take the words of a movie director in reference to their own work at face value. These are only opinions, after all. When *we* asked Boll to compare his work with that of other directors, for example, he simply responded: "I'm not on set with other directors, so I can't be the judge of them."

What's beyond question, however, is that for the last couple of years and, who knows, possibly beyond, Boll defines the relationship between videogames and movies. If publishers and developers have an issue with his handling of their intellectual properties, they'll need to hold on to it with a tighter grip than they apparently do right now.

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER (2001)


© Paramount Pictures

BUDGET: $115 million
PLOT: British aristocrat Lara Croft is an antiques collector with a distinctly hands-on approach to the hunt for fresh artefacts. But danger comes looking for her when she's switched on to the Illuminati – a secret society seeking a talisman that's able to control time itself.
STAR POWER: Fresh from Girl, Interrupted and Gone in Sixty Seconds, and still part of that blood-vial-swapping relationship with Billy Bob Thornton, Angelina Jolie gave Tomb Raider a hefty superstar kick (and made a much better choice than the originally rumoured Anna Nicole Smith). Plus, real-life dad Jon Voight. And Rimmer from Red Dwarf.
GAME LOYALTY: Jolie, hauling her prop breasts from Cambodia to Iceland, made a superb Croft – confident and aloof as Toby Gard's digital heroine, sexy and scary in equal measure. The script, which went through four separate rewrites, raided The Lost Ark more than tombs, but managed several respectful nods toward the games (*Tomb Raider II*'s Dagger of Xian is auctioned in the background of one scene) while squeezing in angry pottery and shower scenes for the boys *and* girls.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: Croft's graceful midnight bungee ballet was performed in its entirety by Jolie herself. Also a winner: the opening scene that pits Lara against a sadistic training robot.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "This isn't a country, it's an ice cube."
THE RESULT: Lifting the curse of the videogame-to-movie adaptation, Tomb Raider took a whopping $274 million, making it an instant sequel contender. "A lacklustre start to what is nonetheless sure to be an extremely lucrative franchise" moaned the BBC.



DOUBLE IMPACT

Before the German invasion, the world of gaming movies lay in British hands. Not everyone, however, was willing to salute

Whether or not Uwe Boll is fazed by the reception that greets his movies depends who you speak to. There is, however, one man who must surely sleep blissfully in his bed at the thought of the doctor's flourishing career, and not only because Milla Jovovich is probably in there with him. Paul W S Anderson, the highly bankable British director who gained initials, presumably, to avoid being muddled with the similarly named director of Magnolia, Boogie Nights and Punch Drunk Love, is now an ex-pariah of the game-adaptation realm. At least, that is, until he makes another one.

Anderson, his production partner Jeremy Bolt and film school graduate Danny Cannon were the Britpack moviemakers of the mid-'90s, vaulting from warmly received home-grown debuts Shopping (Anderson, Bolt) and The Young Americans (Cannon) to the bright heat of Hollywood. While Cannon was burned by those flames – his blockbuster adaptation of Judge Dredd dying at the box office and invoking nothing short of a fatwa from the minions of Tharg – Anderson and Bolt's Impact Pictures instead, in 1994, adapted Midway's *Mortal Kombat* and were exalted.

Making extensive use of CG visual effects, Kombat proved that, if reduced to their most basic form, movies could both faithfully *and* successfully work with videogames. Never mind the previous year's meddling Street Fighter and the sacrilegious, if perversely entertaining, Super Mario Bros of the year before that – this was as winning a formula for adaptation as anyone had seen. But no sooner had it appeared in theatres than 3D revolutionised both the appearance and narrative potential of games, rendering the formula somewhat obsolete. Shortly after that came Resident Evil.

Inspired by Romero's Dead series and the post-Hiroshima monster movies of Japan and America, Resident Evil was enormously cinematic, but for the pre-millennium US it was hardly cinema-friendly. At first, Romero himself had been auspiciously attached, penning a screenplay that was tantalisingly faithful to both his own style and that of Mikami's game. Packed as it was with creatures, grandiose environments and tense but relentless action, however, Romero's draft was seen as a project destined to jam in the gears of the Hollywood machine. Something more convenient and above all reliable was needed, and Impact readily stepped in as Romero stormed out.

True to the game's basic premise and vocabulary, Anderson's vision of *Resident Evil*, released in 2002, nonetheless sacrificed close to everything else. It was economical, generic and loud – perfect fodder for the teens but an affront to both critics looking for palatable cinema and fans looking for sincerity. Those critics may have been wrong in their suggestion that the movie's flaws lay in its videogame roots, but by persistently comparing it to John Carpenter's Ghosts Of Mars and not to the game itself they unwittingly hit the nail on the head. This was pop science-fiction too bastardised to warrant comparison, and too routine to work the best from even its own ideas.

It did, however, recoup over $100 million worldwide, and in Hollywood that's all the vindication you could hope for. A sequel – Apocalypse – was fast-tracked for release in 2004, and in accordance with its consistently raucous content made almost exactly the same money, and just as few lasting fans. Whatever kudos Anderson and Bolt had garnered for movies such as Kombat and 1997's messy but memorable Event Horizon had been all but erased by their treatment of Capcom's game. As scribe and visionary, however, it was Anderson who bore the brunt of gaming cinemagoers' rage, an online lynch mob assembling post haste to let him know all about it.

For fans, a movie adaptation isn't just an opportunity to indulge, it's a chance to have the subject of their obsession recognised by the non-gaming community. A misrepresentation, therefore, isn't just a bad experience in the theatre – it's a kind of betrayal. Perhaps, though, it isn't so much the mistreatment of one franchise but the hunger with which the movie trade eyes the rest that causes real anger. Next year, the slate of Impact Pictures alone is set to include the completion of Transporter director Corey Yuen's Dead Or Alive, Resident Evil: Afterlife and potentially an added adaptation of *Driver*.

But as Hollywood's ambitions greaten, are we past the point of worrying about disposable heroes such as Tanner and Itakagi's girls? Gaming cinema is moving forwards, and the integrity of greater stories is now at stake. Doom is surely guaranteed a mammoth return, and it isn't just Uwe Boll who is looking to feast on its counterparts. Before you hit the post button, though, know that it isn't as bad as you might think…

TRUE TO THE GAME'S BASIC PREMISE, ANDERSON'S RESIDENT EVIL NONETHELESS SACRIFICED CLOSE TO EVERYTHING ELSE


Things shouldn't work out too badly for Impact's Dead Or Alive, the barebones beat 'em up structure of the game setting up an efficient cinematic brawl in the same vein as Mortal Kombat. One note from Aerosmith, however, and we'll be throwing Minstrels at the screen

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #9
BRAINSCAN (1994)

Praying perfectly on the concerns of parents sent out of their minds with worry by *Mortal Kombat*'s murderous play, Brainscan has a post-T2 Edward Furlong hypnotised into a killing spree by 'the ultimate in interactive horror' (on four CD-ROMs). From another celebrity screenwriter: Andrew Kevin Walker was the pen behind Seven and Sleepy Hollow.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #10
VIRTUOSITY (1995)

The director of The Lawnmower Man returns to VR, with a clunky thriller set in a technologically advanced future: 1999. Denzel Washington squares up against Sid 6.7, a synthesised virtual reality serial killer – composite of Hitler, Charles Manson and more – that, yes, comes to life. Sid is played by Russell Crowe, who's clearly having fun even if we aren't.

RESIDENT EVIL (2002)


© Screen Gems

BUDGET: $33 million
PLOT: A virus leaks into a secret experimental facility and gives its occupants a case of the zombies – at which point the computer controlling the complex locks the place down. The military and a girl called Alice have three hours to break in, smash the computer and prevent the virus escaping.
STAR POWER: 'Creative difficulties' finished off first-choice director George A Romero, so Paul W S Anderson returned to the videogame movie fray. Milla Jovovich seemed to suck up all the casting dept's dollars – the rest of the cast was filled out with actors from Prime Suspect and Casualty.
GAME LOYALTY: Mess with *Resident Evil* at your peril. Series aficionados were dismayed that this amounted to little more than Aliens with the undead, complete with Vasquez clone and flash-bang gunfire in place of the games' claustrophobic terror. Lickers, zombie dogs, *RE2*'s train and *that* mansion made fleeting cameos, but Romero's script – leaked onto the net – was better.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: For us, it may have been the cinema inadvertently stretching the ratio for the first five minutes, making Milla Jovovich's briefly glimpsed nipple around 24 inches long. For others, it was Collins meeting a slicy, dicy death at the hands of a mesh of lasers.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "I could kiss you, you bitch!"
THE RESULT: Despite the moans and grunts of *Resident Evil* fans shambling out of the cinema, the movie took $102 million worldwide. "Someone should have eaten the script and director as well", said The Guardian.

SWEET DREAMS

From the grungiest quarter of the gaming realm comes a ray of light. Roger Avary, writer of Silent Hill, takes us on the tour

How could director Christophe Gans better assert the notion of an alternative reality than by producing the world's first intelligent movie based on a videogame? Though the Brotherhood Of The Wolf director is working from a script (by celebrated writer/director **Roger Avary**) that toys with the characters and events of the games without being 100 per cent faithful, evidence suggests that much is being done to preserve the series' atmosphere and style. Notably, series composer turned producer Akira Yamaoka has been enlisted to compose the film's score, while Patrick Tatopoulos, whose resumé encompasses illustration work on Seven, production design work on Dark City and myriad creature design roles on movies such as Pitch Black and I, Robot, is charged with realising the town's skulking denizens.

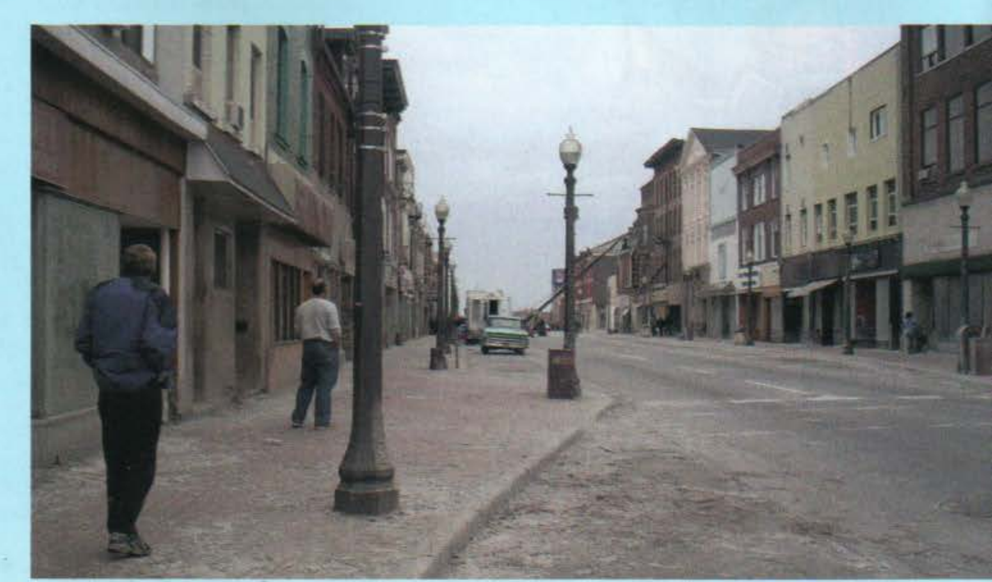
"Christophe loves the big moment," reveals Avary. "If someone's walking through a doorway, he wants it to be the best walking-through-a-doorway-scene of all time. So I had to turn the dialogue moments into something that John Milius [screenwriter of Apocalypse Now and Conan, as well as uncredited writer of the USS Indianapolis speech from Jaws] would write. When he writes a speech, it's always this moment where people are talking in hyperbolic terms and everything that's said is quantifiably profound. I wanted the movie to have that feeling of a witch movie, which is what it essentially is."

"Have you ever heard of *Zero Wing*?" he asks. "That's usually the quality of translations in these games, so we attempted to go through and smooth it all out. The difficulty with *Silent Hill* is that it's an abstract experience – you're making something that's dreamlike in many ways, where someone's in an alternate dimension."

It's in the handling of game characters, specifically that the project has taken its biggest liberties, even if their situation and purpose is largely familiar. "Christophe wanted it to also be oestrogen-filled," Avary reveals, "so almost every character is a woman. The character Rose is really a composition of multiple characters throughout the series. Originally, her husband [a new character played by Sean Bean] was almost not even there, but they [the studio] actually requested that we make more out of him. That led us to some very good places and some visual things that we came up with that play with parallel dimensions and that otherwise wouldn't have happened."

At a glance, it may seem as if the *Silent Hill* universe and cinema's horror-suspense genre are perfect and convenient bedfellows. Take a couple of Pyramid Heads and dashes of Videodrome and Jacob's Ladder, paste on a rich layer of David Lynch and stay painstakingly faithful to the story. But what of those qualities that the game exhibits because it *is a game* – the sensation of being adrift, for instance, that's derived from either being or becoming lost in its labyrinthine environments? How do you convey such slow-burning qualities in the space of 100 minutes?

"Actually, because of that it became a very difficult script for the studio to accept," says Avary. "Christophe wanted to ensure that when we had dialogue, we wrote it big. But for the most part, much of the movie is a silent film. There are scenes where Rose is just wandering through Silent Hill." Will this material make it, we ask, into the final cut? "Well, I haven't seen the final version, so who knows what it'll look like. But in the script phase, we had long moments where seemingly nothing happens. It's all atmosphere – you're falling slowing into a world and experiencing it much like you would in the game. A normal movie that costs $50 million or however much this did has to have as normal a structure as possible, and everything is now so finely structured



While on set, Silent Hill's crew sprinkled cellulose 'ash' over the various stores, cars and newspaper stands, while the dense fog that helps characterise the game is to be added artificially in postproduction. The town will still exist on two planes – one less welcoming than the other



Photography: Matthew Kukan

Much of the challenge for designer Patrick Tatopoulos has been rendering the oversized proportions of famed series characters such as Pyramid Head with only moderate help from CG. Gans has also been adamant in his desire for a ceramic, doll-like artistic theme to pervade throughout

that people have become programmed to like it. But Christophe is a bit like Hector Berlioz in that he likes to blend together different kinds of movements. He has no problem spending 30 pages of a screenplay just exploring a world before pushing the story along in other ways."

Interestingly, much of the film's now-completed shoot transformed Colborne Street in the city of Brantford, Ontario into the bewildering Silent Hill, but life for the local residents and shopkeepers continued as usual. When the cameras weren't rolling, pedestrians were granted free access while many existing stores and companies, temporarily renamed and redecorated with haunting decals and props, opened for business.

The production – formerly titled Centralia – has been shrouded in secrecy, but much can be gauged from what's been so far seen and said. No apparent hijack attempt has been made to deviate the project from its roots, and barring the last-minute replacement of Yamaoka or some Tony Scott-styled editing job, it should at least provide an answer to that great 'what if' regarding accurate adaptation. Assuming that the movie receives such things on release next year, will the culmination of fan satisfaction, critical praise and modest revenue provide a feasible alternative to those blockbuster dollars – one to inform future adaptations such as Peter Berg's Splinter Cell, Stan Winston Studios' The Suffering and whichever other game project one day emerges from Jackson, Bay or whoever else? "I think that as games become more cinematic, there'll be a natural convergence. One of the greatest frustrations between games and cinema is that game designers have been attempting to fall into passive entertainment. You're playing an interactive game and then suddenly you stop and you're sitting there watching a cinematic. It's like, well, hold on a minute, this is a *game* and I'm not an active participant. Maybe the question is: will Silent Hill make game designers more comfortable? Guys like Uwe Boll have done a lot of damage, and I don't know whether one good adaptation will undo all of it."

The way things are going, it's no exaggeration to associate talent as prolific as Spielberg with gaming's silverscreen future – the Jaws director was, after all, seen prowling the *FEAR* stand at this year's E3. And gaming needs to knock on the doors of people such as these if it really hopes to shake up Hollywood. But just how many times has gaming produced something that's genuinely worthy of their attention? Would Avary, as a representative of the writing trade, be inclined to adapt any other existing games? "I don't mind saying that there is another Konami title, which I can't mention because they haven't closed the deal on it yet. We've already gone into discussions about adapting that material and that would, I must say, be a dream come true."

Let the speculation commence.

■ *The full transcript of Roger Avary's interview can be found at www.edge-online.com*

"I DON'T MIND SAYING THAT THERE IS ANOTHER KONAMI TITLE WE'RE DISCUSSING. I CAN'T MENTION IT, BUT IT'D BE A DREAM COME TRUE"



HOUSE OF THE DEAD (2003)



Chris Helcermanas-Benge © Artisan Entertainment

BUDGET: $12 million
PLOT: A group of college students head for a rave on an island off Florida – also known, it transpires, as The Island Of The Dead. Arriving to find the rave disbanded in bloody style, the teens decide the place is worth exploring. Unsurprisingly, they regret it.
STAR POWER: Almost but not quite bagging Bob Dylan's son as director, House Of The Dead ended up with a cast list that included Jürgen Prochnow – for whom legendary German sub flick Das Boot is a long-distant memory – and Ron Howard's brother Clint, who won a Lifetime Achievement Award from MTV for services rendered to the movie industry as an all-purpose klutz.
GAME LOYALTY: A Romero wannabe, House Of The Dead is faithful to its videogame dad for the oddest of reasons: actual footage from Sega's game is intercut with live action, and the screen fades to red to mark a character's death. There's little to the plot beyond screaming teens picking up guns and blasting at zombies to a deafening backing track – a preposterously terrible movie, to be sure, but as brainless (no pun intended) as the game.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: It's a brave screenwriter that names a boat skipper Captain Kirk – and pits House Of The Dead's head zombie against a teenage girl in a climactic fencing competition.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "Isn't it nice to know someone wants you for your body?"
THE RESULT: Recouped its budget – just – with a worldwide gross of $13 million, but at the time of writing is 44 on IMDb's bottom 100 films of all time. "Prochnow must wonder how his career has sunk lower than the U-boat he used to command in his halcyon days of Das Boot" – The Times.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #11
NIRVANA (1997)

Must-see Italian thriller starring Christopher Lambert which asks: what would happen if a videogame hero became self-aware, threw his hands up at all the needless killing, and asked his creator to bump him off for good? Presents a nightmare future for game developers, at least: star programmer Jimi has a speaking clock installed in his hotel room that counts down the hours left until deadline.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #12
GRID RUNNERS (1996)

Nothing to do with the Jeff Minter game of a similar name, this is, essentially, Virtuosity all over again. It's a cheerfully cheap all-kickboxing thriller concerning a scientist who brings two 'cybersex babes' to life, along with a grumpy warrior who, for reasons not adequately explained, is unable to move his mouth when he speaks.

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER: THE CRADLE OF LIFE (2003)



Alex Bailey © Paramount Pictures

BUDGET: $95 million
PLOT: An earthquake uncovers the ancient palace of Alexander the Great, and the key to the location of Pandora's Box. Lara Croft races to prevent a Chinese crime syndicate – led by Jonathan Reiss, a very evil man indeed – from tracking down the treasure, with help from a former boyfriend.
STAR POWER: With the increasingly bankable Jolie crowbarring herself back into the catsuit, Croft was guaranteed another blockbusting run – although fans chuckled nervously upon learning that Jan de Bont (previous jobs: Speed 2, The Haunting) was on board as director.
GAME LOYALTY: Racing from Kazakhstan to China (actually Wales) and finally to a (real) live volcano, The Cradle Of Life is a breathless trip, widely considered an improvement on the first film. But with a sudden explosion of screenbusting stunts, it feels more like *GoldenEye* than *Tomb Raider* – at the point where Croft and her love interest skydive from Hong Kong's International Financial Center, it wouldn't be a surprise to hear the Bond theme to kick in.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: You've got to admire the scriptwriter's gumption – and the director's bravery – for having Croft attract a passing shark with a drop of her blood, then *punch it in the face* and ride its fins to the top of the ocean to escape a crumbling underwater world.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "You can break my wrist – but I'm still gonna kiss you."
THE RESULT: A very respectable $156 million, but the BBC still wasn't happy: 'It's as though they wanted to make a terrible film'.



HAIL TO THE CHIEF

Halo promises to give gaming its ultimate blockbuster. Writer Alex Garland tells us what it takes to bring life to gaming lore

By Bungie's own account, it was providence that placed **Alex Garland**'s name on the list of prime candidates as it contemplated just what the writer of 28 Days Later could do with the Flood. A million dollars later and following some anxious consideration, Garland was aboard and the big-screen blueprint of Halo was assembled. Microsoft's subsequent demands as it touted the script to Hollywood – delivered in typically ostentatious fashion by couriers dressed as the Master Chief – were high to the point where, for even a traditionally high-concept idea, they'd have ended discussions there and then.

The Redmond computer software giant wanted $10 million against 15 per cent of the eventual box-office gross, as well as an assurance of $75 million below the line (studio speak for the amount invested before a cast and director are hired). Once every major studio besides Fox and Universal had unsurprisingly backed out, the two distributors joined forces to broker a more acceptable deal, and set the production's light to green.

However the project turns out come its 2007 release – whether the studios adhere to the script and 'bible' sent to them by Bungie or not – Halo is a massive undertaking for a lucrative franchise, handled by all concerned with an appropriate degree of respect. Is this a sliding scale, we ask Garland, that holds the key to making game adaptations more faithful and creditworthy?

"Personally," he replies, "I don't think it would be helpful if faithful games adaptations came as the result of financial clout and brand-name recognition. If anything, I think it could be harmful to games, by reinforcing an already powerful leaning within the industry towards the generic and mainstream. To use books as an example, Remains Of The Day and Lolita were not faithful film adaptations because the marketplace had demanded it. They were faithful because the books owned something that the respective filmmakers wanted. Namely: narrative, developed characters and themes."

So how else can the mainstream industry's inability to convey the sentiment of the games it adapts be changed? Should the likes of Halo, Splinter Cell and Spy Hunter prove both successful and faithful, will that be the precedent that shakes studios' association of artistic integrity and risk? "Most adaptations to date," says Garland, "were an inevitable consequence of two cynical bodies joining forces to release a mutually beneficial product, with the sole intention of making money. In that respect, I think that in general the games industry has had the adaptations it deserved. If it wants better, it needs to be more selective about who it sells a licence to, and why."

There's an assumed goal in this line of argument that, before it's set in stone, we should question. For the games that we think deserve it – and everyone has their ideas – should we really expect such a thing

"THERE'S NO QUESTION GAMES HAVE EVOLVED TO A POINT WHERE THEY CAN INSPIRE FILMMAKING. IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE ICO AS A DELICATE FILM"

as a 'faithful' adaptation? Is it not the case that, to date, the most accurate interpretation of a videogame remains Anderson's aptly juvenile Mortal Kombat? "Regarding Mortal Kombat, I agree. But there's no question that games have evolved to a point where they can inspire artful filmmaking. It's easy to imagine *Ico* as a strange, quiet, delicate film that sat outside the mainstream in a way that was entirely appropriate to the game, or even *Tempest 2000* as an esoteric low-budget hallucinogenic sci-fi movie. That said, if you want art-house film adaptations, you need to produce art-house games to adapt from. The games industry is stunningly inventive, but only within certain parameters. To date, those parameters don't leave much room for the kinds of instincts that produce Ghost World as a comic book, or The Ice Storm as a novel – both of which were adapted into non-mainstream films."

As the synopses that pepper this feature illustrate, the infiltration of Hollywood by the videogame industry hasn't solely entailed the osmosis of its IP. Gaming as a concept has, in fact, been embraced by the movie industry on more occasions than the individual games themselves, albeit, in many cases, as thematic nods and cultural references. Garland is no foreigner to this idea – Danny Boyle's adaptation of his novel The Beach added its own passing comment on gaming and its place in our latter-day subconscious. Was this new scene – a pixelated depiction of a delirious Leonard DiCaprio bounding robotically through the jungle – too crude a statement to crowbar in, or did its crudity in fact reflect an endemic degree of incompatibility between games



Fumito Ueda's *Ico*, says Garland, is easily pictured as an art-house film. Regardless of whether Halo is a smash, however, such a project would still represent a brave and visionary gamble for its creators – one that, at best, would thrive as a midnight movie or DVD sleeper





Plenty of questions are raised by the prospect of Halo that no one's currently prepared to answer. Just what adjustments can we expect to have been made to its tale? Will the Chief keep his helmet on, for example, or are we in for a bombshell of Judge Dredd proportions?

and films? "I think that scene was the writer and director making a nod towards some references to videogames that existed in the book," says Garland. "But I didn't actually work on the film, so I can't be sure. What I can say is that the references in the book were for no other reason than the narrator played a lot of games. No social or artistic commentary intended. I believe games and films are extremely compatible. They just aren't as compatible now as they will ultimately prove to be."

And what, then, of 28 Days Later – part of a burgeoning subgenre of zombie pics that mirrors and also intersects a similar movement in gaming? Was the spirit of that screenplay informed at all by videogames such as *Resident Evil*, or have those games in fact added nothing to George A Romero's established formula that's of worth to modern cinema? "It was definitely influenced by *Resident Evil* [the game series]," reveals Garland, "and as far as I'm concerned, the games added something substantial to the genre. They brought a Japanese sensibility, something gothic and lyrical. That's partly why 28 Days Later ended up in an old mansion house rather than, say, a shopping mall."

Ultimately, this could be the most important proof, in lieu of whatever Halo and Silent Hill provide, that games can provide something that's not only applicable to movies, but also whimsical enough to warrant their attention. Though the Bolls and Andersons of the film industry have thus far been content to recycle videogame properties for the sake of furthering tired action genres, the incomparable spirit that doesn't translate so easily is still of worth to Hollywood, and can still be honoured in the right hands. So as we again address the question of whether games are themselves too derivative to deserve adaptation, we leave Garland with the final word.

"I don't think that games are any more derivative than films – or literature, for that matter. It is true that they can be both derivative of each other, and of themselves, but I wouldn't necessarily see that as a bad thing. If anything, I think it is right and proper for them to adapt, borrow and steal from whatever they see fit. All these things are judged first by the marketplace and by the passage of time. And if they pass that judgement, all power to them."

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #13

THE CORPORATION (1996)

Not content with Grid Runners, director Andrew Stevens returns to videogames for a softcore treat about a codeshop that employs subliminal messages to hypnotise customers into buying its next, overpriced game – and far worse. If you're wondering where you've seen star Ian Ziering before, five numbers for you: 90210.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #14

EXISTENZ (1999)

Typically gory David Cronenberg fare that mashed up reality and digital fantasy around the same time as The Matrix. Jennifer Jason Leigh is the world's best game designer, unsure of where the real world starts and videogames end (no surprise, really, given her game is played by inserting a 'bioport' into the spine). Notable for its organic guns that use teeth instead of bullets.

ALONE IN THE DARK (2005)



Chris Helcermanas-Benge © Lions Gate Entertainment

BUDGET: $20 million
PLOT: Edward Carnby, a detective of the paranormal, is led to Shadow Island while investigating the mysterious death of a friend. It's no island paradise: Carnby learns that ancient demons are planning a global coup d'état, and is subjected to all kinds of weirdness as he battles to foil the forces of evil.
STAR POWER: The fact that a German band called Solution Coma contributed the title song is the first warning. The second is Christian Slater, who these days is usually catapulted straight past the cinema and into a DVD rental store near you. The third is Stephen 'You remember – FearDotCom' Dorff. Fourth: Tara Reid. Fifth: Tara Reid as a museum curator.
GAME LOYALTY: Another Uwe Boll disaster (nestled directly above House Of The Dead in IMDb's Bottom 100 at the time of writing), Alone In The Dark is a disaster. Laughable CGI demons abound in a film that combines experiments on orphans, ancient Indian artefacts, government conspiracies, invisible photosensitive mutants, and what Screenit! calls 'an extreme amount' of scary music. At least it's dark, with characters that are occasionally alone.
STANDOUT MOMENTS: The opening crawl that doles out entire screenfuls of thoroughly unnecessary plot exposition – a sweetener added after test audiences expressed confusion, and which 'goes on for so long that it seems like it's going to segue into the closing credits', to quote The Onion.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "Fear is what protects you from the things you don't believe in."
THE RESULT: The signs for Boll's Bloodrayne aren't good: this recouped less than half its budget with a $6 million gross worldwide. 'Makes you... hope that something more sophisticated is on the horizon. Pong: The Musical, perhaps', crowed The San Francisco Examiner.

RESIDENT EVIL APOCALYPSE (2004)



© Screen Gems

BUDGET: $45 million
PLOT: The Umbrella Corporation reopens The Hive, accidentally unleashing T-Virus mayhem on a city-wide scale. Alice joins forces with STARS operative Jill Valentine as the zombies are unleashed on the unfortunate Raccoon City. And this time, she's got a new nemesis: Nemesis.
STAR POWER: Milla Jovovich remained the only star with the faintest glitter. Sienna Guillory was second choice for Jill after Natasha Henstridge, Mike Epps was second choice for LJ after Snoop Dogg, and the series maintained its suspiciously high frequency of German actors that only Germany has heard of.
GAME LOYALTY: The clever first trailer – a spoof ad for the Umbrella Corporation's 'Regenerate' skin care cream – raised fans' hopes that this would be a more respectful sequel. It was, with Jill Valentine, Carlos Oliveria, Raccoon City, STARS, Nemesis, the Licker (again) and exploding buildings all satisfying Shinji Mikami idolisers. Apocalypse also wasn't scared of cracking jokes about *Grand Theft Auto* and *Mortal Kombat* ("Finish him!").
STANDOUT MOMENTS: The embarrassingly unrealistic use of computers is something even videogame-based movies can't avoid – one review singled out the moment where 'a scientist searches for a computer hack by typing 'hack search''.
TYPICAL QUOTE: "We're assets, Nicholai. Expendable assets... and we've just been expended."
THE RESULT: An unexpected blockbuster that has grossed $129 million worldwide to date. 'There was no reason to produce it, except to make money, and there is no reason to see it, except to spend money' – Roger Ebert.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #15

HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER (2001)

Three programmers compete to create a creature for the game *Evilution* – due to the developer offering a million-dollar bonus for the nastiest monster devised. Pure fantasy, then, especially given their relaxed four-week deadline. Still, the monster that's made (and which inevitably springs to murderous life) isn't so bad.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE #16

AVALON (2001)

Depressing fantasy from Ghost In The Shell director Mamoru Oshii, set in a rundown eastern European country where videogames have become the new heroin, and bathed in a bewitching sepia palette. It all goes a bit The Matrix as top gameplayer Ash descends into 'Class Real', the bonus level in an addictive VR game.



Generation game

Will the Micro bring fruition to Nintendo's handheld roots, or is the tiny handheld destined to topple in the winds of change?



It's a nice little joke. The world's biggest videogame console is about to become the smallest. The Micro is the third iteration of the GBA, and the sixth variant of the world-conquering Game Boy. For the first time ever, videogaming really does fit in the palm of your hand and, more importantly, into any of your pockets. The design is sound, the screen vibrant, the special editions and swappable fascias a canny extension of Nintendo's proven policy of catering to the customisation craze.

And that should surely be that: another

successful entry in the canon of the handheld game business. But despite the inherent desirability of such a dinky distraction, the Micro raises a rattle of awkward questions. How can Nintendo expect its long-suffering fanbase to buy the same hardware for the third time? How can an aging 2D machine realistically compete against the novelty of the DS and the power of the PSP? And most importantly of all: where are the top-notch games that could effectively silence the first two concerns? Big questions for a little console, but then questions have dogged the GBA from the moment it arrived.

The first, almost instant, question took a number of forms. For the frustrated it was: 'Are you kidding us?' For the stoic it was: 'Did you think this through?' and for everyone it was: 'Are you going to fix it?' The darkness of the original GBA's screen was an almost instant disappointment for early adopters. Despite a lot of brave press releases from Nintendo, there was no getting away from the fact the machine was often a literal pain in the neck to play. It was a severe enough problem to affect even developers; some working on games at the time the hardware arrived recall their studio buying in a job-lot of Ikea desk lamps to ensure that the team could see what they were doing. And it left Nintendo with a big problem: fix it quick and alienate the early adopting hardcore, or fix it late and see enthusiasm for its most important machine leach steadily away. After months of speculation, including heady rumours of free upgrades for current owners and dark whispers about the fate of Triton Labs, the enterprising outfit that had pioneered front-lit mods, the SP arrived. Two years later and just a little pricier, it proved such a sound reworking of the machine that it met with little hostility.

And yet, when it comes to the GBA, Nintendo shows an almost Islamic aversion to constructing perfection. If the original had a frustratingly dark screen, the SP had an irksomely absent headphone socket. And now the Micro, which finally sees your old Game Boy games reaching obsolescence and requires you to re-buy link-up cables and wireless adapters. So is Nintendo trying to evolve the GBA toward perfection, or is there a real intention to use the specific capabilities of each version to push people into buying the same hardware more than once? **Kenichi Sugino**, designer of the Game Boy Micro, is unapologetic: "The history of Game Boy shows that people do not mind owning different versions of a portable games machine within the same family. Rather, they seem to appreciate the fact that they have the different variations to choose from, depending on when and where they would like to play. Some may want to play SP at home but may want to carry the smaller Micro, in order to play the same game continuously when travelling. We hope that people will use different GBA machines at different opportunities."

Nor is the form the result of idle tinkering with the GBA's design, a 'what can we do with it now?' approach. Instead, the thinking behind it shows that if Nintendo is looking over its shoulder in the handheld gaming space, it's not the PSP that it sees gaining. Sugino explains: "For Micro, we knew that there were many people who really love to play games on a portable machine but opted to play with cell-phones on the train. With the smaller and cooler-looking Micro, we want them to enjoy perfect gaming with the optimised gameplay controls, without having to worry about the cell-phone batteries running out too rapidly to make calls." Mobile gaming may be a faster-growing issue in Japan than it is in the west, but the Micro represents a rare chance to see Nintendo responding to someone else's trend.

"The history of Game Boy shows people don't mind owning different versions of a portable games machin

The Micro's screen is a big draw – dense, bright and clear, it holds your attention tightly enough to stop you thinking about just how eye-clenchingly tiny it really is

However, Nintendo's approach to the GBA has always been emblematic of its whole philosophy. In a business where the accepted mantra is that you lose on the hardware and profit on the software, Nintendo is still demonstrating its usual stubbornness: why not make money on them both? And with new iterations, multiple colour variants and special editions – and with endless ports of its precious back catalogue – why not make money on them again and again and again? It sounds like exploitation, but there's a simple defence: don't buy. Many felt they had little choice but to shell out again for an SP – although the

SUPERCALIDIGITYLISTIC

The most eye-catching GBA game at this year's E3 was cross-studio collaboration *Digitylish*. Featuring pared-down game design with dramatically stylised visuals, it seemed clear that the game was designed to compliment the Micro's launch. However, Nintendo is now refusing to comment on the project, fuelling suspicion that one of the GBAs most intriguing projects is badly troubled.



Choosing the right base colour will prove crucial when teaming your Micro with new fascias. What are the odds on an all gold *Zelda* edition and retro Game Boy version?



The SRPG is hardly under-represented on the GBA, but *Rebelstar Tactical Command*, reviewed in the next **Edge**, offers crisp visuals and some new twists on tactics



GameFreak's *Drill Dozer* (previously called *Screw Driver*) promises a genuinely fresh take on the action platformer, where nearly all scenery can be drilled to destruction

sting was soothed by the bonuses of the rechargeable battery and clamshell design – but since then, Nintendo's determination to empty the pockets of its fans is a two way street: the only reason to buy is your own desire. No one can accuse the company of not building its machines – and indeed its games – to last.

But the games are the sorest point of owning a GBA. Heralded on an **Edge** cover as offering 'Pure Gaming', the GBA was to rejuvenate gaming by refocusing attention on titles prizing innovation and gameplay over hyper-realism and faux-cinematics. And it was supposed to rejuvenate game development by providing a viable alternative for small and independent studios. And with 66 million GBA-owning potential customers, surely variety would flourish.

Four years on, the GBA software situation is bleak. The charts reflect a constant stream of licensed games: *Madagascar*, *The Simpsons*, *The Incredibles*, *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, *Fantastic 4*, *Scooby Doo*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, *Power Rangers*, *Shrek*, *Finding Nemo* and *Monsters, Inc.* are all riding high in the current UK top 20. Some are decent enough games – others, of course, are not – but none represents the kind of inventive, artful excellence that the best GBA titles exhibit. Nor have independently-minded codeshops benefited: those that are making a good living from the machine, like Vicarious Visions, do so almost exclusively from licensed games and ports.

So what went wrong? Why is that only Nintendo has managed to regularly produce first-class software on the platform? The basic answer is that the equation at the heart of GBA development didn't turn out to be so tempting after all. Making a game which exploits the platform to the full takes longer and costs more than some foresaw. And, on top of that, comes Nintendo's notorious licensing costs and cartridge charges; some top-selling titles still often ship without a battery save to keep the price down. Worse, the retail prices are lower for handheld games, and under constant pressure from a market which wants them lower still. And, once made, the games are targeting a younger install base – a demographic which the games industry currently struggles to speak to directly, and a demographic which is under continual siege from the marketing departments of film and TV properties. The margins get too thin, the market gets too fickle. Despite being the second best-selling console in the UK, with an install base besting the Xbox and the GC combined, the GBA often accounts for less than 10 per cent of games sold. High quality titles like *Astro Boy: Omega Factor* struggle to top 10,000 copies.

This is the perception Nintendo needs to turn around to help the Micro make its mark. There's little, however, in the upcoming release list to lift spirits: the Japanese Micro launch has only *Mario Tennis Advance* and another Nintendo re-release (*Dr Mario & Panel De Pon*) to keep it company. Beyond *RebelStar Tactical Command* and GameFreak's *Screw Breaker* (retitled *Drill Dozer* in the US) there's little on the horizon. Why has software production, even from within Nintendo, slowed so much? "It may look like that way now, but the fact is many new GBA software developments are underway," reassures Sugino, but it's suggestive that he's not able to reel off a list of tempting projects. There's no doubt developers have been distracted by the arrival of the DS, but why develop for a market of six million when you can reach out to a market ten times that size? Without a shift in the underlying economics and in the retail and advertising of GBA games, it's hard to see the situation changing.

It's tempting, then, to dismiss the Micro as the emperor's new clothes – something which caters more for collectors than gamers, perhaps, or a real case of less is less. With the DS and the PSP dominating the headlines and the shelves, how can it compete? The next two pages, which catalogue some of the console's best and most interesting games, should answer that question. Because, for all the disappointments, the best of the GBA's line-up is still some of the finest software ever designed. And for all of its exploitative intentions the Micro is still a sleek, solid and desirable games machine. The DS may offer constant innovation, and the PSP may out-power it on every front, but if you're going to have only one gaming device in your pocket, the GBA – even the Micro – still towers over the competition.



The Play-Yan media player cart has been specially redesigned so as to protrude from the Micro as little as possible



Only the slightly awkward shoulder buttons give any cause for concern in the Micro's overall design: form neatly following function



The Game Boy Advance Library

Putting together a definite list of the finest Game Boy Advance titles is an exhaustive and deeply subjective task. Here instead are 12 excellent games – no ports allowed, all developed purely for the handheld – which form the core of an unimpeachable GBA library. And, if too many of these titles are already rather too familiar, the next page lists six overlooked gems and six Japan-only games which are well worth tracking down

ADVANCE WARS

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYS



After seven previous volumes on nearly every Nintendo console, all neglected outside of Japan, *Advance Wars* found new life and new regions on the GBA, its warm western reception cementing it as one of Nintendo's most important new multiplatform franchises

SUPERSTAR SAGA

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ALPHADREAM



Superstar Saga's fraternally cooperative battle system, the liberties it takes with Mushroom Kingdom lore and what's easily the most hilarious script on the handheld all work – appropriately – in tandem for what might arguably be the best of all the Mario RPGs

TLOZ: THE MINISH CAP

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



As with nearly every other iteration of the long-running *Legend Of Zelda* series, *The Minish Cap* is the product of its predecessors, shamelessly borrowing bits and pieces of its lineage to continually best its own past, creating a handheld classic once again

CASTLEVANIA: AOS

PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The pinnacle of Konami's progressive fine-tuning of the portable series, *Aria Of Sorrow*'s wide whip-less variety of weaponry and compulsive soul collecting place it just a hair's breadth below *Symphony Of The Night* as the greatest of the non-linear *Castlevanias*

POKÉMON: RUBY/SAPPHIRE

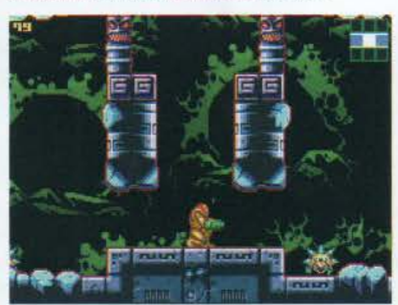
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: GAMEFREAK



Though Nintendo's 'if it ain't broke' ethos, clear in the minor graphical update the Game Boy Advance versions received, may initially come off as cynical, the series' addictive qualities and near-faultless balance ultimately bear out *Pokémon*'s winning formula

METROID: FUSION & ZM

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Spared the fate of its fellow franchises, rather than giving us *Super Metroid Advance* we saw two new episodes – *Fusion* and *Zero Mission* – the former with near survival horror lurking dread, the latter with a narrative twist further humanising the mysterious bounty hunter

KURU KURU KURURIN

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: EIGHTING



A staggeringly simple premise coupled with, at times, maddeningly difficult execution – the feeling of nailing a flawless run after the pulverising stress of dozens of failed attempts makes this action/puzzle game one of the most rewarding titles in the GBA's library

TACTICS OGRE

PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: QUEST



Unreleased in Europe, and lesser known than *Final Fantasy: Tactics Advance*, this is the GBA's best SRPG. Endlessly deep and impressively physical, *Tactics Ogre*'s dynamic battlefields meant waging neatly gridded wars could never turn into a by-the-numbers routine

WARIOLAND 4

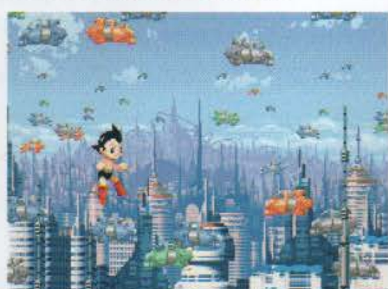
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The tense double-back emergency escapes and some brilliantly obscure obesity-based puzzles made this one of the GBA's greatest sleeper hits. Pre-boss minigames and the Sound Room's photo animations are a portentous symbol of the greatness to come

ASTRO BOY: OMEGA FACTOR

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: TREASURE



Advance Guardian Heroes may have disappointed but this was the real deal: original, welcoming, challenging and entertaining. Treasure's *Astro Boy* made the most of the GBA's power by adding, scaling and mobbing bizarrely appealing enemies

BOKTAI

PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Technically remarkable, visually inspired and structurally inventive, *Boktai* silenced critics who felt that Kojima had become a one-trick show-horse. The sunlight-sensor mechanic is beautifully worked, but the game stands on its own substantial merits

WARIO WARE, INC.

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



It belongs at the opposite end of the list from *Advance Wars* because where that is slow and rational this is breakneck and unhinged. Nonetheless, both are perfect handheld games: beautifully presented, perfectly-paced and greedily satisfying experiences

CAR BATTLER JOE

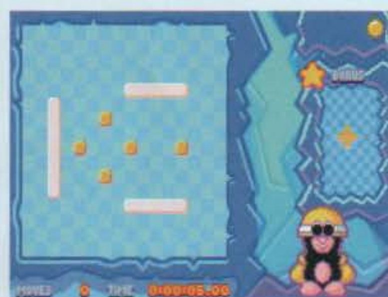
PUBLISHER: NATSUME DEVELOPER: ANCIENT



A pre-teen retelling of Saturn arena-based vehicular brawler *Vatlva, Joe* is an ultra-charming handheld Thunderdome. Fully customize your vehicles as you take on post-apocalyptic world-rebuilding assignments, played out in heated bird's-eye Mode-7 battles

DENKI BLOCKS

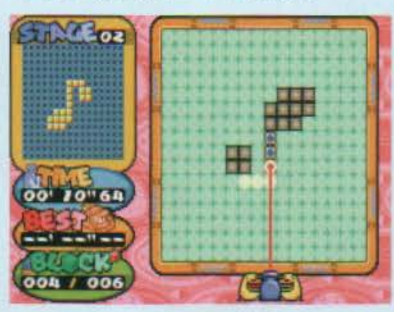
PUBLISHER: RAGE DEVELOPER: DENKI



Deceptively simple four-direction controls and Denki's signature pastel designs both mask fiendishly difficult scenarios, This is everything a good handheld puzzler should be – instantly approachable, and quickly and reliably rewarding even in just a few minutes of play

GURU LOGI CHAMP

PUBLISHER: COMPILE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Compile's last hurrah was additionally the best new idea in block puzzles for years: create grid pictures (a la *Picross*) by turning the playfield and both firing and sucking blocks from a cannon. Endlessly un- and re-weaving block patterns is the game's greatest pleasure

MOTHER 1&2

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Given Earthbound's extremely vocal cult fanbase and the existence of fully localised scripts for both *Mother* and *Mother 2*, how and why the compiled release has remained in Japan may yet remain one of the Game Boy Advance's greatest unsolved mysteries

NINJA COP

PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT



One of the rarest Game Boy Advance titles is, rather unfortunately, also one of its finest. Equal parts *Shinobi* and *Bionic Commando*, *Ninja Cop* did precisely what the GBA was meant to do – revel in and rekindle the clarity and immediacy of the 16bit glory days

GO! GO! BECKHAM

PUBLISHER: RAGE DEVELOPER: DENKI



Denki's curiously-licensed platformer is another example of the spirit of the 16bit era being masterfully captured on the GBA. From its primary-coloured worlds to its Kondo-inspired steel-drum melodies, *Beckham* is as much a tribute as it is fun to play

TOMATO ADVENTURE

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ALPHADREAM



This was Alphadream's first RPG venture, before the firm landed the job to work on *Superstar Saga*. The two games share some superficial qualities, primarily in their non-traditional timing and minigame-based battle systems, complete with gimmick weapons

STARFI

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: TOSE



With three volumes already released, *Starfi* remains one of the most conspicuous absences from Nintendo's western catalogue, especially for as safe a bet as it seems: an adorable lead and solid (if simple) platforming mechanics do not necessarily a worldwide release make

CIMA: THE ENEMY

PUBLISHER: NATSUME DEVELOPER: NEVERLAND



Though marred somewhat by particularly touchy pathfinding AI, *CIMA* is one of the GBA's best action/strategy games, as you set waypoints for a group of survivors to follow in single file, while simultaneously beating back the relentlessly advancing enemies

KLONOA 2

PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Far more polished than its portable predecessor, *Dream Champ Tournament* is as yet the last of *Klonoa*'s platform puzzle adventures (before being sidetracked by an ill-advised action RPG) and is an essential purchase for both fans and newcomers

MR DRILLER ACE

PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Even with the eventual gracious inclusion of DriStone mode in *Drill Spirits*' European release, *Ace* remains the definitive handheld version with story-driven singleplayer modes, better implemented grand prix and a creature raising sim thrown in for good measure

CUSTOM ROBO GX

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: NOISE



On and off the docket for a worldwide release before disappearing for good, *Custom Robo GX* took all of the joy of meticulous robot tinkering and modification, and the all-guns-blazing arena battles of the N64 originals, and perfectly reinterpreted them into 2D

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Advance Wars: Dual Strike



Two screens don't quite amount to twice the fun – but the love is still there, as proven by the battlefields' consumption of lunch hours, nights, days and entire weekends.
DS, NINTENDO

Silent Hill 2: Restless Dreams



Few games could have enjoyed so many repeat playthroughs. All it takes is a handsome-looking movie and an overlooked ending or two to suck us back into the living fog.
XBOX, KONAMI

Magic Pengel: The Quest For Color



Finding a long-lost memory card takes us back to the drawing board. But which painstaking old creations will die to free up more paint for the new ones?
PS2, AGETEC

Bad game hunting
Why hard games make it harder on themselves



Games like *Tekken 5*, which give the player continual control over the difficulty setting, are still, inexplicably, in the minority. How much wider might gaming's appeal be if the challenges it presented were more flexible?

Americans talk about having an elephant in the room. Not in the sense of a new trend of impractical celebrity pets, but in the sense of an issue so enormous, an obstruction so insurmountable, that everyone just keeps talking as though it simply isn't there: there's no problem so big that it can't be ignored.

Videogames are sharing a room with so many elephants it's a wonder there's room to move, let alone jump, shoot and drive motorbikes about the place. There's an elephant for sex in games, another for sexism in games. One for industry working conditions and another for the impact games have on players' minds. But one of the oldest, biggest and strongest – the alpha male, perhaps – is the elephant who doesn't finish games. It's not a complicated issue: most players don't finish most games. Is it really possible to ignore a problem that big, that central and that damaging?

Yet it's what most publishers and many game designers do. And while there are many reasons for an unfinished game – boredom, distraction, dislike – the biggest remains the difficulty. Despite instructive traditions like Capcom's offer of dropping down a difficulty level if you've struggled in a game's opening sections, they haven't been widely adopted. Despite BioWare's demonstration that you can give the player full control of combat difficulty throughout something like *Knights Of The Old Republic* without sacrificing the sense of challenge or satisfaction, the attitude persists that unless games present a stiff, fixed challenge, players won't like them. But how is a player supposed to know what they're getting into?

It's all very well presenting an easy/normal/hard choice at the beginning of a game, but the person making that choice has never played the game before. How on earth are they supposed to know what will suit? And when and if they find they've chosen badly, why not let them change? At the very least, in a game with an appropriate kind of difficulty system, it should always be possible to drop down a grade. What conceivable argument is there for refusing to let the player drop the difficulty bar if they've stopped having fun? Forget the BFG: videogaming's most potent weapon could very well be the elephant gun.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



BLACK & WHITE 2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OCTOBER 14
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD
PREVIOUSLY IN: E126, E151, E152



As before, a bit of slap or tickle will discourage or encourage your creature in certain behaviour, with a gauge showing how clearly it understands your meaning





The cornmill is an essential early purchase, alleviating resource management chores. The interplay of the effects the buildings have on city life is balanced and rich



While you can only act directly within the green ring of your influence, your troops and creature can take orders beyond

The creature was the very heart of Lionhead's 2001 debut, *Black & White*. More than the divine micromanagement and social strategy that made up its gameplay; more than its invisible interface; more even than the responsive moral dimension that gave the game its title and turned out to be by far its most influential invention. The creature was an invitation to form an artificial personality that would, like the rest of the world you shaped, reflect your own – a sort of avatar for your subconscious mind. It certainly succeeded in reflecting the game's personality: intractable, infuriating, charming and confused, a source of astonished wonder to some, bitter disappointment to others, and to a great many, a source of both. But its wild magic was undeniable.

Black & White 2's creature is different. Your god's personal pet and slave is a more eager and predictable beast, easier to train, simpler to control and less prone to errant behaviour. Even though it's more useful as an instrument of your will, it's less of a focal point, partly because it's more reliable and partly because it has been gently sidelined within a much more comprehensive and flexible framework for civilisation building. It doesn't embody the game any more, but it still echoes it: stable, adaptable and pliable, remarkably clever but strangely vacant.

Structurally, though, the game is largely unchanged. Playing god, shaping the world and the fate of your people with a floating, disembodied hand, you're entreated to rebuild and avenge a Greek civilisation that is all but destroyed by the vicious Aztecs at the start of the game. You do this over a series of microcosmic islands, developing progressively larger and more complex societies each time, and 'winning' each land by converting its indigenous tribe – from Norse to Japanese, all obeying Aztec rule – to your own cause. The prayers of those players who hated being asked to repeatedly destroy and rebuild their work have not been answered, although at least you don't have to physically dismantle it yourself any more, the transition happening automatically with a simple click.





Your god's personal pet and slave is a more eager and predictable beast, easier to train, simpler to control and less prone to errant behaviour

So the traditional goal-orientation that sat so uncomfortably atop the first game's psycho-social sandbox hasn't been scrapped, far from it. It's been brought to the heart of the experience, sharpened and reinforced by two thoughtfully crafted and absorbing strategic options for taking each land: by military might, or by the impressive wealth and fairness of your culture. Since these are strictly aligned with evil and good respectively, they also distil the game's moral dimension into two distinct play styles, essentially organic, rustic reinterpretations of *Command & Conquer* and *Sim City*.

This clarifies your moral path, but also oversimplifies it, and exposes it to outside influence. Ambiguity is ironed out, and contradictions rise in its place: is it really evil to meet force with force in the defence of your town? Is it still good to build infrastructure if it's only to support pillaging armies? Arguably, it's also imperfectly balanced, tipping the game's moral scales slightly but persuasively towards the good. An army needs a town much more than a town needs an army, especially since you won't meet truly aggressive opposition until well into the game. Considering that the RTS







The infantilsation of the creatures is a little too sickly to begin with, and though they grow immensely in stature and majesty, they remain cartoons to the end. The original game's art style had more gravity and conviction



In the middle of an interminable training session that effectively lasts for three lands, you witness the Aztecs raze your Greek city with a few scripted moments of interaction, allowing you to kill or save as appropriate

element is also a more stressful and fast-paced way to play, the path of righteousness can easily seem like the path of least resistance. But then, given the inclination to benevolence that should be obvious from the screenshots accompanying this review, we would say that.

Black & White 2 makes up for a lack of philosophical complexity by allowing you to shape your world in immense detail. Resource management has thankfully been streamlined, and your concentration – such as it is in what is still a game of distracted multitasking – will be focused on earning tribute for minigame challenges (see 'Rock and scroll') and level-specific objectives that cover the whole gamut of gameplay. Tribute can be spent on an immense range of plans and abilities, from civic buildings, defensive walls and military bases to miracle powers and the grandiose new wonders. The latter – volcanoes, earthquakes and army-possessing sirens – seem unfairly skewed towards a belligerent style of play. Kind gods, however, will probably get so engrossed by the aesthetic and social engineering possibilities of the town planning system, tracing exact road layouts with a sweep of the finger, that they won't miss them. As an RTS, *Black & White 2* is less deep, but just as flexible and responsive – and when creatures, miracles, wonders and large armies are all in play it's arguably the greatest show in gaming.

The victim of all this choice was the original's quest for a graceful, elliptical interface that could handle such a complex game. *Black & White 2* is comparatively conventional and laborious. The intrusively ugly and poorly designed menus and the town hub information system disrupt and cheapen these lush worlds, but nonetheless make them more manageable. The gesture commands are gone, although they can be bought back in the form of a miracle ability.

This approach permeates *Black & White 2*. Generous expansion and rational improvement are bought at a cost: emasculation of the beautiful, impossible ideal that defined the game to begin with. It's crystallised, once again, in your interaction with the creature. Its moods and impulses are laid bare to you in thought bubbles. It can be leashed to a role – builder, gatherer, entertainer, warrior – and forced to act, eroding its free will. The training leash that taught it by your example is gone, and with it maddening hours of puzzled stares and violent disobedience, but gone too are your sense of parental pride and intense connection. What was once an erratic, unknowable, independent presence is now no more nor less than a brilliant piece of videogame AI code. Like the rest of *Black & White 2*, it comes as a bittersweet relief. Lionhead has made a much better game, and a much more ordinary one. **[7]**





A town's hub has a scroll bearing stats, columns which rise and fall to indicate inhabitants' desires and a crucible indicating the strength of your alignment toward good or evil. As an immediate visual aid it's pretty useless, so you'll need to hover your hand over it for tooltip trees

Rock and scroll



Black & White 2's dispiriting low points are the quests, indicated by silver scrolls dotted around quiet corners of the islands. Presumably, they were intended to relieve the daily grind with a little variety, an opportunity to test your dexterity or your riddle-solving nous; you might be asked to throw barrels at targets, guide a spy through a maze by switching signposts, or follow clues to find treasure. The majority are laughably simplistic, half-baked designs framed by lumpy and ingratiating cutscenes. They have the whiff of cheap pre-teen edutainment about them, glaringly at odds with the sophistication of their surroundings, and their status as minigames does not excuse their poverty of inspiration at all.



SPARTAN: TOTAL WARRIOR

FORMAT: GC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCT 7 PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY PREVIOUSLY IN: E151



The Romans favour engulfing you in a tide of manpower. Don't succumb to the temptation to kill all the weaker units first, though – they're better rationed out as rage-fodder



That The Creative Assembly is a developer of rare talent has never been in doubt; its *Total War* series of historical military strategy games for PC has a reputation for unrivalled excellence in its field. But even bearing that in mind, *Spartan: Total Warrior* – its brazen and brutish console debut – is an unreasonably impressive stunt. To switch platforms, markets and genres for the first time, producing a game that in style and substance is wholly antithetical to your previous output but at the same time bears such a strong family resemblance to it that your studio's identity is underlined not undermined... you're having a laugh, surely?



They face flamethrowers, towering steampunk war engines, an all-star roster of monsters and a Roman Empire of Cockney-accented, high-camp villainy

And, surely, they were, because the irreverent joy had in *Spartan*'s making is obvious, and infectious. The scenario begins plausibly enough, casting the player as a nameless Spartan defending his great Greek city from Roman invasion, but within minutes plunges into a preposterous myth-mash of eras, legends and archetypes that robs every corner of antiquity for famous names before cheekily misapplying them. The hero's allies include Castor and Pollux recast as Spartan soldiers, an Amazonian warrior named Elektra and none other than Archimedes, the scientist-magician and revolutionary orator. Their adventure takes them to the ruins of Troy and a Roman-occupied Athens that has more than a hint of Paris under the Nazis. Together they face not only slings and arrows, but flamethrowers, turrets that fire explosive lances, towering steampunk war engines, an all-star roster of monsters and, behind it all, a sorcerous Roman Empire of Cockney-accented, high-camp villainy.

Amidst all this indulgent bastardisation, however, *Spartan*'s design is one of stern simplicity – though it's no less shamefully enjoyable, and far from unrefined. It shrugs off the one-on-one fighter influence of most melee-combat romps, eschewing the baroque spectacle of combos in favour of a terse, thorough system of focused and radial moves. Anything the Spartan can do – hack with his primary weapon, fire his bow or knock enemies back defensively, unbalancing and exposing them – can be applied in these two ways against single or multiple targets respectively. That includes the savage, slow-motion 'rage' moves unleashed after a short string of successful strikes, and the even more destructive weapon-specific 'God power' moves.

As elegant as it is, this system might have proved limited and unrewarding if it hadn't been matched with the massed enemies that are *Spartan*'s, and The Creative Assembly's, signature. The teeming waves of soldiers that

...And the sword was God



As his adventure progresses, the Spartan gains access to a range of divine weapons, selectable on the D-pad. They vary in speed, radius and effect – Athena's twin blades being perfect for slicing through enemies, Beowulf's hammer for pushing them back – but their focused power attacks are to all intents and purposes identical, and useful solely against bosses. The radial power moves, though, are vital for crowd control and are what really set the weapons apart: the Medusa shield and spear of Achilles quickly become favourites for their ability to buy time by turning enemies to stone or create chaos by setting them on fire, respectively.



The game constantly appraises you of the bloodiness of your achievements, but the conditions of this system are hard to fathom, and anyway it's irrelevant outside Arena Battle mode







The nameless hordes that the Spartan slaughters are not nameless at all. Energy bars in the top right reveal The Creative Assembly has christened every single enemy soldier; a wryly funny contradiction of the game's casually murderous style of play



mob the Spartan and his often numerous, but always outnumbered, cohorts are an awesome sight – and they give the combat a militaristic thrill and brisk tactical rhythm that are just as distinctive. You'll be stringing together targets rather than moves, aiming for maximum number-crunching efficiency in your carnage as you plough through weak troops with radial blows, aiming to build rage quickly enough to take down a heavy centurion or wipe out a row of archers with a single strike. Clearing space and saving overwhelmed allies (though never the immortal Castor, Pollux and Elektra) are other, equally novel priorities. The strength of opposition is always perfectly balanced with the Spartan's own increasing power, and the properties of the weapons he acquires add another pleasing, if more optional, tactical layer (see '...And the sword was God').

Viscerally satisfying and pleasantly weighted it may be, but *Spartan* also has a near-reactionary artlessness. As it progresses, the game broadens but never deepens, varying objectives and enemy types with welcome frequency, but never the blunt brutality of its combat. The Creative Assembly has fled as far from complexity as it has historical accuracy, and whether you interpret this as condescension to its new market or relieved liberation from the exacting demands of its old one, the result could almost be a parody of the dumb console actioner. Any lasting pleasure it gives will be drawn from the drama, detail and naked audiovisual glory of its level design, and this is where the game is ultimately at its strongest, and its weakest.

You will never forget the first few levels of *Spartan*, just as the game never quite matches them for the rest of its length. The Roman assault on Sparta is a masterpiece of juggled offensive and defensive objectives and awe-inspiring showmanship; the



The most unexpected of The Creative Assembly's talents to be revealed in its move to consoles is a flair for character art. Charismatic hairstyles and costuming abound, the style being more forceful and economical than many western developers'

counterattack on the Roman camp switches smoothly from infiltration to furious pitched battle without breaking its headlong pace for a second. The sense of brothers-in-arms comradeship is seldom equalled, especially in the all-too-lonely backtracking through crumbling Troy, or Athens' arresting but infuriating escort and assassination missions. The remainder of the game frequently hits such highs but never sustains them so well, nor plays to its own strengths quite so effectively. However, it only betrays itself completely once – in a dismally conventional boss battle around halfway through – and though at times *Spartan* threatens to become routine, it never does, thanks to its strong character, handsome looks and sheer, irrepressible verve.

Spartan's rough edges – the inconsistent level design, the patchy audio, the seemingly half-complete interface – will hopefully be ironed out in the continuation of what seems bound to become a robustly entertaining and well-loved *Total Warrior* franchise. With *Spartan*, The Creative Assembly has shifted its attention from the high-minded affairs of men to the vainglorious brawling of mere gods and heroes; to make this stark transition successfully is impressive enough, to make it note-perfect would just have been unnerving. To err is human, after all. **[7]**





Environments are largely kept simple and open, the better to flood them with bodies. They're still evocatively pretty, though, and the game shimmers with a deep, burnished haze not unlike *POP:SOT*



BURNOUT REVENGE

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: CRITERION GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E153





Vehicles such as those awarded to Elite-ranked players provide some convenient advertising space in addition to their superior horsepower and traction. With this product placement precedent set, however, it's a shame to have to reveal that the game's 78-strong garage at no point incorporates the Outspan car

Against expectations, *Burnout Revenge* isn't its series' version 3.5 but rather the fourth gear of a racer that's never known a modest pace. Traditionally, it flies in the face of danger by making the kinds of changes that would commonly write off its less capable peers, addressing previous flaws on the fly while not once standing still. At this speed, it's no wonder that the series' erratic direction makes gamers woozy – fearful, perhaps, of the moment when this joyride's zealousness piles it into a wall. But breathe easy: that moment isn't now.

Its visual feedback might bay for blood more actively than before, but the game's thrust this time actually isn't its retribution system but a new set of rules concerning traffic. Provided it isn't oncoming, stationary or significantly heavy, traffic in *Revenge* will do you no harm. Vehicles dart momentarily forwards after 'checking,' as such shunting is dubbed, surrendering with a Hollywood screech of rubber to a trajectory reflective of the impact. Ploughing through a rush-hour jam intensifies this chaos, rolling vehicles into a breaking wave of wreckage that brings *Burnout*, finally, to the point where not an inch of its visual field lies beyond the lick of its flames. Importantly, this extreme new weapon is also balanced: the greater the fury you unleash, the greater the chance a crafty shard of scenery has of slipping in beneath your radar and shearing you in half.



On Xbox at least, *Revenge*'s framerate is rock solid, even at those times when it throws the complete RenderWare manual at the screen. The volume of environmental detail, head-up effects and particles that this engine combines is astonishing

It takes more than caffeine, luck and a nosebleed to truly become master of these streets, and this is *Revenge*'s greatest achievement over its predecessor. The eight locations, split as usual into varied circuits, are arcade racing dreams given form. Decorated with customary charisma, one will evoke the breathless beauty of *Point Of Impact*'s Crystal Summit, the next the end of RoboCop, but overall it's their layout that provides the greatest departure. The trunks of these courses have been shredded and plaitted to the point where one shortcut or stratospheric jump primes you almost immediately for another. Increasingly, they insist that you learn their every fork, elevation and protrusion – and punish you severely for failure.



> There are moments when a takedown will backfire, but just as in any finely balanced sport, you crash out and luck out in equal measure







It's still possible to plot an ideal course through all of Crash mode's junctions, but the decision to remove multiplier pickups and make crashbreaker availability dependent on collisions rather than trajectory is a wise one. Tweaks made to the scoring system have also helped make this a party game that's unpredictable right to its last second

It's a miracle, in fact, that *Burnout* keeps track of *itself* as well as it does, and no surprise at all that it often doesn't. Factors such as human error and malicious intent are difficult to sift from such symphonic destruction, and the game confuses them, if anything, slightly more than it did before. Were the world run by Criterion, motor insurance would be its least honest trade. There are plenty of moments, especially as the game closes out, when a sure-fire takedown will somehow backfire into a crash and a dawdling car will merrily lance you from out of nowhere, but just as in any finely balanced sport, *Revenge* sees you crash out and luck out in equal measure. A more pertinent concern, perhaps, is how you regard the taught elastic band handicapping that is utterly essential in AI races as anarchic as these, but equally intolerable for some gamers.







The Burning Lap – a crushingly demanding event during *Takedown*'s finale – has relaxed its time limits this time, though they're still strict enough to generally rule out crashing







Completing *Burnout* is no longer a case of simply scraping past the line mere inches from your opponents – a rating system keeps tabs on your driving flamboyance as you race, and only by topping it while finishing first can you place the word Perfect above an event



Players of a certain rank will soon see the benefit as standard race types become Crashbreaker versions, offering the chance for instant retribution against Revenge Rivals and anyone else foolish enough to be in the vicinity. Take out every other racer on the track in one triumphant bang for this warming reward



Burnout 2: Point Of Impact was one of the first games to really show how overbright could accentuate the solar glare and sparks of the arcade racer. In both its crashes and scenery, *Revenge* takes this to the brink of excess but never beyond

At the risk of sounding like a press release, however, there are few rules, even for arcade racers, that *Burnout* hasn't incinerated. Its balancing act may seem artificial, but ultimately it's fair. Furthermore, *Revenge* proves a shrewd taskmaster as it moves from one tier of events to the next. Gradually, it fills its AI racers with vitriol, its gridlocks with unbreakable juggernauts and its streets with wave upon dense wave of cars. The new Traffic Attack mode, where cars must be shot about the road like cue balls into packs of reds, thereby evolve from unwelcome and overlong novelties to some of the game's most exhilarating challenges. Only by tempering your boost (the game openly admonishes the habit of so-called 'spurt boosting'), focusing your aggression and leaning judiciously on both the accelerator and brake can you hope to prevail in any of the game's closing stages.

The series' other concern, as exacerbated last year, is longevity. *Burnout* has become a game so voraciously obsessed with combat that its players can only respond in kind, meeting it punch for punch in every round until there are none left to fight. The singleplayer game is an unapologetic medal quest and, once it's done, the multiplayer component must bear the burden. When that happened in *Takedown*, it stood for a moment before collapsing amid a technical and logistical online fiasco. Praise be to Criterion, then, for meeting half of the issue head on with an overhaul of the game's online scoring system: a game that vocally rewards all of arcade racing's requisite skills during solo play now finally does so online. Curses, conversely, to EA for crowbarring its own servers into the otherwise exemplary Xbox Live service again.

The game's splitscreen play, at least, is quick to provide its own kind of multiplayer performance guarantee.

Whatever its longterm fate, *Revenge* significantly represents further solid proof that Criterion has the Jerry Bruckheimer genome down pat. Its razzle-dazzle reliably out-detonates any game that dares follow suit, and though its development has been speedy by even its own standards, its developer isn't one to launch a firework without explosives. *Burnout* still carries a payload large enough to blow apart not only the clots in the racing genre's bloodstream, but also the pillars of any argument that suggests gamers need a next-generation platform to set their screens alight. **[8]**

Crashlander

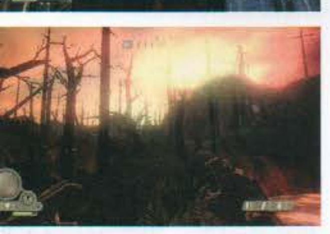


Much has been made of the power/accuracy meter and crosswinds that appear in *Revenge*'s golf-inspired Crash mode. Interestingly, and contrary to first impressions, it's none of these that make this crash mode the series' best. Rather, it's the removal of *Takedown*'s join-the-dots power-ups and the opening out of junctions into larger and more dynamic layouts. Checking has been incorporated extremely well, and is key to orchestrating the kind of collateral damage needed to disrupt multiple streams of traffic. Though some junctions are recycled during the singleplayer mode, as a multiplayer party game Crash has hereby taken an important step back before leaping in a different direction – one that makes it all the more enjoyable.

FAR CRY INSTINCTS

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 30
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E150, E151, E153





In its virtual cinematography and narrative direction, *Instincts* is a plunge into a heart of the utmost darkness. Though the mine stage is actually quite a tiring slog, its artistic design ensures that few of its passageways feel repetitious

It's claimed that whatever you say to a Frenchman, he will translate it into his own language, and forthwith into something entirely different. Ubisoft Montreal's artistic, novel and moving interpretation of *Far Cry* is a particularly French, suitably transformed experience. Even if its technical handicaps are clear, what it achieves with the palette at its disposal is astounding. *Instincts'* lower resolution textures, sporadic pop-up, cruder characters and jagged shadows are all clearly defined beneath its baking sun, but the composition of the overall canvas offers a masterful distraction.

This is a game dismantled, rearranged and, in many cases, replaced. The painstaking flow of Crytek's *Far Cry* has been streamlined and the environments narrowed, but the real fruits of Montreal's work lie beyond such procedural changes. With the exception of a showcase hang-gliding sequence halfway through, *Instincts* resembles the original game for only the first of its three clearly defined acts. From thereon in – from the moment the mutagen is fatefully pumped into hero Jack Carver's bloodstream – the mood changes and the island's waters flow ominously uphill.

You will, by this point, have already experienced a concise tribute to the original – one that apes its beguiling visuals while toying craftily with its design. But with the aid of some innovative POV effects and capable voice work from Steven Dorff, Carver's evolution then heaves the player into an unexpected, unhinged stagger from one ecological extreme to another, from daunting agoraphobia to dismal claustrophobia, and from the opulent wilds of nature to the oppressive constructions of man. Successive new feral abilities are introduced via suitably dramatic chokepoints, and before long a transformative skill and mindset are in place for a remarkably staged finale.





Rolling on to your back while lying prone and blasting your unknowing adversaries' groins is more than a mere tribute to John McClane – it's a testament to Montreal's open-minded approach to this licence

Without giving too much away, *Instincts'* closing hours plumb depths of desolation that few games are sophisticated enough to realise, or even imagine. An island that once wound itself into a labyrinth of pristine and somewhat generic interiors has, under Montreal, been smashed, burned and dehumanised. As darkness falls and Carver becomes truly bestial, the player's heart feels aptly lost between the island's welcoming shores and the bedlam that surrounds its volcanic core. Apocalypse Now has long been regarded as the template for this game's dramatic makeover, and here its hallucinatory vibes are truly free to roam.

Aptly, however, the game's story ends more with a whimper than a bang, its climactic set-piece/cutscene combination proving thematically satisfying, but no less abrupt than the end of *Chronicles Of Riddick*. Furthermore, while *Instincts'* journey may be one of the its genre's most theatrically adept and intense, the sacrifices it makes en route are significant. The procedural AI, for example, touted as a dynamic reflection of your own tactics, works as often as it doesn't. The heat of battle

> As darkness falls, the player's heart feels aptly lost between the island's welcoming shores and the bedlam that surrounds its volcanic core

provokes some enthrallingly versatile behaviour, but incidents elsewhere can prove as confusing for the player as they evidently are for the opposition.

Importantly, *Instincts'* shift beyond that first third is more than just a narrative twist. What begins as an uplifting balance of stealth and action soon, as the evolution factors in, becomes a more straightforward turkey-shoot. There's still a strategy of sorts behind its most frantic outbursts, but it's of a more repetitive and, as it happens, instinctive variety. The game wants you to become frenzied in your approach and gracefully spawns small armies of soldiers to satisfy your rage, but while it's thematically prudent to simplify the game in this manner, it also plots a course for some numbing encounters. This is a shame because, visually, *Instincts* is adept at keeping itself fresh, within as well as across levels, and in a way that's a lesson to others.

It's also too comprehensive a package to let its singleplayer mode have the final say. In multiplayer, *Instincts* speaks with its own voice while remaining relevant to the global







That *Instincts* can recreate the plunging canyons and abundant flora of *Far Cry* at a solid framerate is achievement enough, but the fleeting load times and checkpoint saves make it a bona fide technical marvel









The speed with which the Predator darts for its prey in multiplayer is conveyed through a variety of effective filters. The grace with which it leaps forward to attack and up on to rooftops to evade reflects the clean control system, and makes for a nerve-wracking hunt

Fans of the Crytek *Far Cry* will remember its underwater sequences, along with their unconvincing stillness and clarity. The wobbling surface waters of *Instincts* may not be the most realistic, but the overall effect is far superior

theme, and nowhere is that better expressed than in Predator. Twisting many of the game's singleplayer systems into a mode that entirely befits the name, it clearly adores the stylistic trappings of movies (its namesake in particular) where man must confront a superior adversary that knows how to make an ally of its surroundings. As the player or players (the quantity is selectable) designated randomly as Predator scan the radar and environment for the odour trails of their quarry, an ideally larger task force of regular soldiers must survive without any such ability. Its scoring system is horribly indecisive, never providing a set of rules or rewards that adequately suits the premise, but the athleticism with which the enemy can scour the map and the cries of other players as it comes running are enough to tell you that, overall, this innovative spin on team deathmatch works.

Traditional modes such as deathmatch and CTF are also honoured, though the benefits and drawbacks of siting them amidst *Far Cry's* lush environments are both immediately clear. Underwater evasion, the setting of various traps and flights along zip-lines are all welcome additions, but vehicles are too light on the stick and too much a victim of the rolling terrain to really prove their worth. A degree of auto-aiming has been implemented, presumably to combat the obstructive flora, but its heavy-handed assistance may well prove ruinous for purist players, while the general shortage of feedback as to who has died and how is unlikely to please the *Halo* faithful. To address the most burning issue, then, *Instincts* may lack the polish to challenge Bungie's game on its own turf, but it's freethinking enough to deserve a place apart as a noble alternative.

For a project that, at one time or other, has resembled everything from ham-fisted homage to bold bastardisation, it's a relief and a pleasure to see *Instincts* emerge as something wiser and more confident. Its action may evolve in a less fruitful direction than its art, but in a console-oriented bumper pack as sumptuous and generous as this, the fact that it's essentially achieved the impossible is surely encouraging enough. **[8]**

Compared to stand-offs such as the sinking ship battle in the original, *Instincts'* boss encounters are more console oriented, requiring opportunistic melees and strafes



Freestyle island



***Far Cry's* online-enabled map editor, much like *Pariah's*, has the potential to offer Xbox Live a thoroughly modern creative community. It operates entirely in realtime – one button click from the adjustable bird's eye view will drop you instantly at the position of your cursor, gun in hand with your world in progress laid out before you. Sensibly, a clearly defined limit has been placed on the number of assets you can drop in, but it's high enough not to feel overly restrictive. Furthermore, the buttons of the Xbox pad have been so cleverly assigned that, when clipping those objects into place, you're never left searching for the right tools.**

Despite the characters of *Global Storm* retaining the names of the British squad – Team SAS – from the *Conflict: Desert Storm* games, the accents have now switched from UK to American



CONFLICT: GLOBAL STORM

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 30
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: PIVOTAL GAMES

Spawn to be mild



The use of spawn points – to filter terrorists into the vicinity of your team in order to keep up the pressure – returns in *Global Storm*, but it's less pronounced than in any previous *Conflict* game. They're still used to coax the player into pushing on, something that felt like a continual pressure in the *Desert Storm* titles, but is suppressed somewhat in *Global Storm*. It's more effectively prompted this time around, employed at suitable moments, but easing off between objectives to allow the player some downtime to pick up any ammo or weapons strewn across the battlefield, and plan their next angle of attack.

It's been a year since the *Conflict* series' tour of duty in Vietnam, an unsuccessful campaign that, by many accounts, resulted in more scars than stripes. But it's one whose spoils do include some hard-fought experience, with *Conflict: Vietnam*'s irritating thorniness made conspicuous by its absence in *Global Storm*.

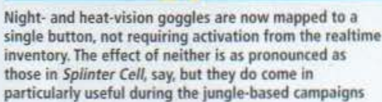
It does open, however, in what seems like Vietnam's climes – terrorist installations scattered across a jungle backdrop – and it's not until the fourth stage that the 'Global' tag kicks in, and the Conflict team act as rescue-and-escort for a political hostage in a city setting. But the biggest improvement in *Conflict: Global Storm* is obvious from the off: its superior solidity. It's there in the sense of rifle recoil, in the control that the player feels over set-piece situations and in the game's appearance: the texture quality has moved up significantly, but the game's look doesn't approach cutting edge. But that's not what *Conflict* games have ever been about. It's about battles that feel tactical without feeling too technical, approachable not trivial, gripping but not strenuous.

Enemies make a concerted use of cover that falls just the right side of annoying, always determined to take up a concealed position, but not so hidden that they won't fall prey to your team's sniper. Firstperson aiming is a slicker and genuinely more accurate alternative to the standard thirdperson view, and a 'delayed order' command allows the player to orchestrate more effective manoeuvres as all four members of your squad simultaneously descend on a battlefield in something more elaborate than a close-knit, follow-the-leader clump.

The set-pieces aren't anything truly new, being chokepoints of troops, tanks and gun nests, but they feel tighter, more open and all the more engaging for it. This is where the game's appeal lies, not in the recreation of grim battlefield realism, but in the player being able to approach each confrontation with their own strategies, both premeditated and hatched on the fly, and win out their own way, even when taking heavy casualties, thanks to the still-valuable ability to revive fallen teammates with a medikit within a generous time limit.

It still feels a little frayed around the edges, however. The odd sloppy-feeling touch makes it through, such as a salvo of rounds from a gunship passing through a wall, or a teammate with superior position and firepower seemingly unable to hold their own against a single terrorist. Such moments, however, are exceptions, not rules, and are much less of an issue than in the frustrating, infuriating confines of *Conflict: Vietnam*. Indeed, *Global Storm* feels like the true heir to the *Conflict: Desert Storm* games in more than just surname, and remains a worthy war effort, despite there being other games that may do it grander or deeper. **[7]**





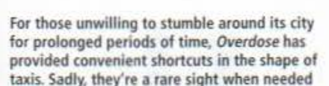
Night- and heat-vision goggles are now mapped to a single button, not requiring activation from the realtime inventory. The effect of neither is as pronounced as those in *Splinter Cell*, say, but they do come in particularly useful during the jungle-based campaigns

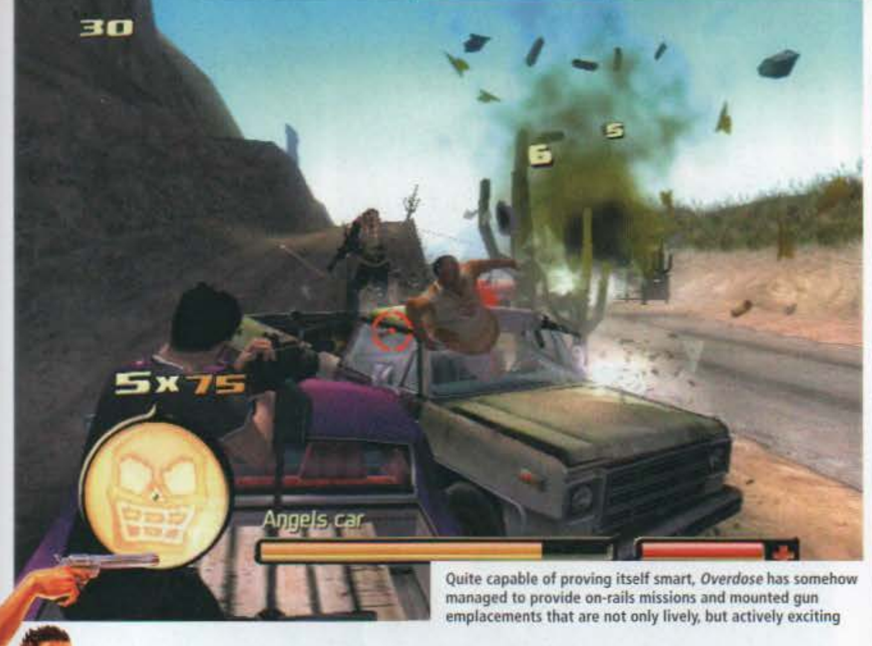
Grenades have been simplified; there's no need to judge distance, as they are simply thrown to wherever your reticule sits. The throw can be delayed, though, to cook the explosive to the player's taste

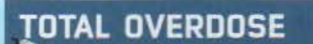




Your squad can now be assigned delayed orders, allowing for synchronised pincer movements or multi-angled assaults. As with the rest of the simple orders, activated by holding the L trigger and assigned with a single button press, it's a smooth and easy tactic to employ







Quite capable of proving itself smart, *Overdose* has somehow managed to provide on-rails missions and mounted gun emplacements that are not only lively, but actively exciting

TOTAL OVERDOSE

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 (PS2, XBOX), £30 (PC) RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCI DEVELOPER: DEADLINE GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E154

Since its first accordion-backed bullet-time shot rang through these offices, SCi's answer to *Max Payne* has put on a reliably boisterous show. All that's remained for it to do has been to enjoy itself for a few more hours, swallow a stick of its own dynamite, strike a triumphant but unashamedly idiotic pose and promptly explode. But a game that has previously wowed us with its confidence has, on closer inspection, developed a surprising issue with its self-esteem. *Overdose* is, quite simply, afraid of being a game without substance, and is seemingly unaware that, in this genre, something it already has in spades is of far greater importance – character.





Essentially, the game is too long. Somewhere along the line, its *GTA*-inspired hub has ballooned into something more demanding. Though it works many a component of the *GTA* formula into its own, this mandatory trek from one stage to another provides many a characterless street, no informative map and only a compass to guide you around. To tour the resulting Bermuda Triangle of dead ends and repetitive incidental missions is to watch *Overdose* decline, and to lament the game that we'd allowed ourselves to expect instead. So energised and irreverent were the story missions encountered that, really, anything could have occupied the space in between: a rude cartoon, a culinary minigame, *Samba De Amigo 3* – anything but this. Was it wrong to believe that the minds behind an exploding piñata and the Sombrero Of Death would know not to stretch the party beyond its ability to entertain?



The rhythmic sway back and forth that came to represent *Max Payne*'s evasive strategy must also be employed here, but there's more than mere bullet-time to occupy your flight. Headshots can be scored in mid-air via a shrinking reticule and a timely button press



For those unwilling to stumble around its city for prolonged periods of time, *Overdose* has provided convenient shortcuts in the shape of taxis. Sadly, they're a rare sight when needed

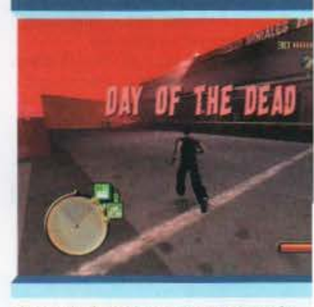


The loco moves that raise such a smile at first sight do, inevitably, become tiring after a while, though at least they succeed in getting you through overwhelming situations. It's a shame, also, that there are so few of them to keep you entertained, especially considering how over-stretched the game has become

You could, in fact, completely excise this portion of the game and immediately have something better. Taken on their own, the story missions still offer an unusually thoughtful slab of accessible thirdperson action. Neither graceful ballet nor ballistic onslaught, *Overdose* remains a fandango – a raucous, exhibitionist meeting of the two. The trajectories and motions of its dance are almost entirely familiar from other games, but the ease with which the steps can be followed is not. Driving, diving and firing are the game's primary models, and the casual finesse with which they can be threaded together is its foremost signature. A smart one-button solution to targeting destructible objects (a definition that incorporates most of the game's environment) keeps the action hectic, while a bonus system that rewards you with health and special moves keeps you alive as your combo rises.

There was never any doubt that *Overdose* would fall foul of one of its genre's various pitfalls, but it's unfortunate that it ultimately had to be one as irksome as excessive length. That its targeting system is flawed so as to be sporadically useless is also unforeseen, if only because an adjustment here and there could have fixed such problems long before they left the barn. At its best, the game still shakes up a loud and spicy Mexican cocktail, but what it's added to the mix has been more than enough to weaken the taste. **[6]**

Theatre of blood



Though there isn't nearly enough to see or do in *Overdose*'s free-roaming city, it isn't without distractions. Besides a healthy scattering of bonuses (most of which float teasingly within reach only of death-defying jumps), it also plays host to civilians whose hats, through a procedure greatly simplified since earlier builds, can be snatched from their heads and placed on your own. The newly bareheaded react in a particularly hostile manner, but unbeknownst to them you retain the right to shoot them in the face. Elsewhere, the Day Of The Dead power-up briefly conjures a horde of ravenous zombies from the local population – perfect for moments when the inability to efficiently navigate the streets has you thirsting for blood.



SERIOUS SAM II

FORMAT: PC, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OCTOBER 14 PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: CROTEAM PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Foreign exchange



As if a glut of vehicles and a female assistant weren't company enough for Sam after his lone trek through the first game, every world – made up from a theme and a collection of stages – has its own indigenous population that can be aided in return for their help. Most of these races seem heavily related to grotesque Sam 'fans' that appeared in the original – squat, swollen-headed, squeaky-voiced and as charming to be around as they are unsettling to look at. They'll often appear to punt some power-ups to Sam, while some only offer such rewards if he successfully helps them out in repelling attacks from Mental's alien forces.

After experiencing an FPS like *Serious Sam*, you'd expect the sequel to be burdened with one of the most wittingly naff subtitles possible, maybe an unashamedly tacky pun. But no: maybe he is serious, after all?

Of course he isn't. It's not long into the game before Sam lends a hand to the diminutive, blue-skinned Simba tribe – one of many friendly races appearing in the game – by protecting their village shaman from impending attack. Seconds later, the player's ears are assaulted by an assortment of barks, explosions, high-pitched Simba chatter, growls, splatters, yells and ceaseless gunfire. To some, it'll be an absolute cacophony; to others, an anthem for gloriously stupid fun, and one that, fundamentally, hasn't changed its tune since the original.

Things are definitely more chaotic, however. An early confrontation with what appears to be a boss character – a large mechanised spider – turns out to be anything but, as its corpse is replaced by four more. And, with those felled, out come a further six. Pack after pack of enemies – who, as in the first game, are the foot soldiers of alien supervillain Mental – spawn and converge on Sam, and it's an attack that feels like it comes from all directions and heights, far more so than the original.

The framerate feels a little groggy, but doesn't strain any further under the presence of the swathes that crowd the screen. There's an improvement in the visuals, especially in the range of colourful ordnance that streaks back and forth across the screen, but it's marred slightly by the sometimes-cloudy draw distance and the static backdrops that loiter in the distance of some of the larger, more open stages.

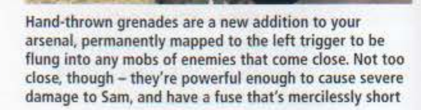




Sam is supported and advised by Nettie, a woman whose crisp English accent only adds to the oddness of it all. Sam seems to have fewer lines of dialogue this time, but they're as reassuringly cheap, cheesy and cheerful as ever



The most overtly gimmicky of the game's stages, such as Sam's journey through a giant junkyard, are some of the best. The latter section, for example, is filled with vivid props such as giant glass bottles, spanners used as bridges, discarded cans and cigarettes – and is home to some daft music. It makes little sense, but that just doesn't matter



Hand-thrown grenades are a new addition to your arsenal, permanently mapped to the left trigger to be flung into any mobs of enemies that come close. Not too close, though – they're powerful enough to cause severe damage to Sam, and have a fuse that's mercilessly short





It hardly feels like evolution, but it feels like so much fun: there's a wide range of vehicles – and turrets – that Sam can commandeer. Massively overpowered, vehicles such as the blade-trimmed hovercraft or a giant, spiky hamster ball are handed to the player just as enemy resistance is quadrupled

Those used to Xbox *Serious Sam* will have a more stuttered experience here, as Sam doesn't respawn on the spot, but at the most recent checkpoint. These checkpoints are smartly placed, however, and there are numerous aids for those who find things gruelling: five difficulty settings, plus an auto-aiming option that turns one of the game's most basic weapons, the single-round shotgun, into one of its most potent.

There's the odd interesting set-piece or twist – some generic, some smart – but these hardly change the game's coarse core, one of relentless, riotous gun battling against wave after wave of imaginatively freaky enemies, opponents who feel unskilled but compensate with some crushing firepower. Inimitably shallow and brilliantly ludicrous ('Secret giant poo has unfortunately been found!'), few other FPS titles can match the intensity of this nitrous-charged shooting gallery, but plenty of them offer the kind of less that feels like much, much more. **[7]**







DARKWATCH

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), OCT 7 (UK)
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: HIGH MOON STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E135, E151, E154

Typical: you wait years for a fantasy western, and then Oddworld Inhabitants makes two at once. Though High Moon's founders left that studio long before *Stranger* solidified, it's hard not to compare the two: but where *Stranger*'s sunburnt world proved much more than a strong shooter, *Darkwatch*'s night shift is less successful.

The firstperson mechanics are arguably no less solid, building on the expected *Halo* foundations – but the ten seconds of play it chooses to repeat throughout owe more to the original *Quake*'s up-close-and-personal action. Nearly all enemy behaviour consists of direct charges, calling on the butt of your gun as frequently as its barrel. While it's undeniably intense, it soon becomes apparent that this intensity is the only string on the designers' banjo, plucked with increasingly feverish rapidity instead of ever-changing chords.

Matters aren't helped by curiously underwhelming level design, with few scenarios, such as a late-game saloon siege, playing to either the game's dark good looks or the spacious set-pieces expected of a western. Instead, the more frequent networks of grey and brown walls encourage little in the way of tactics other than wedging yourself into a corner and clubbing enemies as they arrive, or running in gentle backwards circles firing into a queue of pursuers.

Nor does the storyline offer much in the way of motivation: hackneyed and hacked-up, it belies the weighty design documents and care for nuance that went into its creation, and takes itself too seriously to be read as an intentionally C-movie treatment.



Daylight negates Cross's shield, double jump and special powers unless in the shadows. It's simple enough to stand still and wait for enemies to pile in





Darkwatch's good – and bad – girl partners, Cassidy and Tala, play far less of an active role than their backstories suggest. The game still finds time to undress them both

Playable character Jericho Cross fares worst, coming across as a hopeless stooge rather than a taciturn, undead Eastwood. His blunders are even more of a sore point considering every character in the game incessantly chastises his decisions, yet you have no means to affect any of his choices.

Contrary to prerelease claims, building his good or evil reputation serves only to earn the respective alignment's four special abilities, and has no effect on the game's progression, nor the reactions of its blank-eyed supporting cast. A solitary branch before the final section determines which endgame battle will play out, but doesn't save the system from feeling cheap and inconsequential. By leaving enough to tantalise, then disappoint – epitomised by the opportunity to 'explore the Darkwatch citadel' which confines you to a corridor between three rooms – *Darkwatch*'s biggest supernatural element is that it's haunted by the game it could have been.

What's left of the experience grows tiresome so quickly that playing through to the conclusion may be a matter of duty, not desire. And surely being boring is one thing a vampire western – a *vampire western!* – should never stand accused of. **[5]**

Live undead



Both versions of *Darkwatch* are visually similar – it's an attractive PS2 game and a reasonable Xbox game, with better image quality and framerate on the latter – but only the Xbox version sports online multiplayer. The PS2 version instead offers cooperative splitscreen play, and adds an extra boss level into the singleplayer game. A horseback duel against a captured Darkwatch war train, it ironically turns out to be one of the game's highlights rather than a throwaway add-on, although its brevity won't extend the game's lifespan as much as the Live community should.



Mounted turret sections and the solitary Coyote (let's call it a Warthog) vehicle section are sterile experiences, requiring little more than holding the trigger until enemies stop spawning in the line of fire



KINGDOM UNDER FIRE: HEROES

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCTOBER 7
PUBLISHER: PHANTAGRAM DEVELOPER: BLUESIDE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E152

Ping and country



Heroes' foremost achievement over its predecessor is improved support for online play. A new Invasion mode pits heroes against hordes of opponents in a siege scenario while Hero Battle simply pits them against each other. The most welcome change, however, is an upgrade rather than an addition – now up to six players can loose their armies upon one another. The mode accommodates team matches only, but ensures a tactically honest fight. Moreover, we encountered none of the last game's irksome connection issues, though only a public stress test will give it a thorough workout.

The latest *Kingdom Under Fire* may seem perched between sequel and expansion pack status, but it nonetheless represents a chance. For the many that overlooked *The Crusaders*, it's a chance to discover a hybrid RTS format that remains fresh; for those that didn't, it's a chance to enjoy an enormous, opportunistically adjusted second helping. For gamers generally, it's also a chance to prime that common love of epic battle fantasy for the yet unknown majesty of Phantagram's *Ninety Nine Nights*.

Thematically, the game serves as both catalyst and complement to its predecessor. It chronicles the conflicting deeds of the Hironeiden, Ecclesia, Vellond and Hexter – personified in the established manner by various playable characters and NPC 'sub-heroes', each of whom then fulfils whichever military campaign leads them inexorably into and through the Encablossa War. Seven officers lead the cast this time – an upgrade from *The Crusaders'* four – though a neat reversal means that only one of them is an altogether new face, the rest having previously been introduced as supporting units. The characters they replace complete the circle by remaining in this game, but only to provide assistance.

Beyond its weighty saga (spanning 50 missions in all), *Heroes* is a story of tweaks and fixes that feels more like a means than an end. The strategic experience has definitely expanded, statistical modifiers coming into play as you exploit terrain such as woodland and elevated vantage points, but there remains the distinct impression that we're at a milestone rather than a destination. With its five new units and widened range of special attacks, the game has yet to fully hone the components it introduced last time, some troop types still unable to flourish during situations where they should, AI glitches and inconsistencies still the cause of fleeting irritation.

However, let's not forget how stirring an experience *Kingdom Under Fire* has already become. Having leapt to a world apart from its PC original, it remains a game that works the mind to within an inch of despair, springing traps with man-sized jaws and giving a bloody nose to those expecting a more pedestrian command of RTS action. For all its readiness to pulverise the spirit with often overwhelming challenge, its design strategy is upheld by recognition and reward of levelheaded, adaptive tactics. When its awesome melees, now more chaotic than ever, reach full swing, you'll still find yourself adapting as much to the frustrating limitations and demands of pressured troop movement as you will to the gambits that play out on the field, but the showstopping brutality of the scene is still enough to tie it all together in a perfectly tolerable package.

However unchanged its engine might be, *Kingdom* remains one of few shining instances of eastern craftsmanship applied to the Xbox. Once its addition of custom battles and bolstered online modes is coupled to its undeniably generous campaign, this ongoing road to fruition readily justifies its toll. **[7]**



Integrating the use of aerial support into a strategy already complicated by furious action can be demanding, especially when the AI that governs those units has a tendency to sail them directly over potentially lethal ground-to-air artillery



It may be as much an expansion pack as a sequel, but when returning giants such as the Swamp Mammoth stamp their authority on the battlefield, *Heroes* still shakes its genre



Scouts can prove essential, not only for foiling a potential ambush by scanning the path ahead, but for leading units into a trap of your own. The game makes it possible to lure enemies into forests before setting them alight with flaming arrows, but it doesn't make it easy. Once your scout has been spotted, a moment of negligence is all that's required for the enemy to outrun and overwhelm





CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW

FORMAT: DS **PRICE:** £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Despite the lavishly layered gameplay and perfect parallax visual craftwork, Koji Igarashi's 1997 2D PlayStation masterpiece, *Symphony Of The Night*, was mostly considered anachronistic. But after so many ensuing, largely disastrous attempts to translate *Castlevania*'s hallmark gameplay to the third dimension, there is no small delight in this latest polygon-free release. *Dawn Of Sorrow* is a direct sequel to the GBA games through which Igarashi has quietly continued the series' 2D bloodline, always attempting to match the magic of his first attempt. Indeed, with the DS's power and features, it's perfectly placed to recreate *Symphony*'s wonder while further redefining its dark corridors and dank, lonely castle walls.

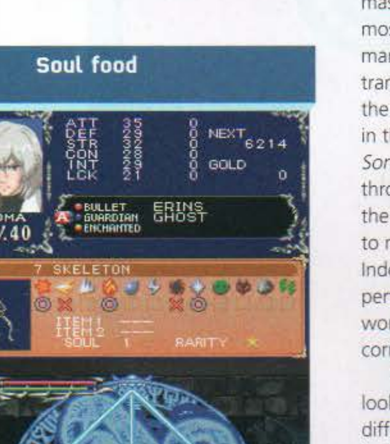
For the newcomer, despite the retro looks, traditional genre pigeonholing is difficult. The modern *Castlevania* is instead a fashionable mix of platforming, side-scrolling combat and RPG management, all poured into a vast but finite castle. Here, the core action system revolves around the capturing of enemies' souls, a development from *Aria Of Sorrow*. Defeat enough of an enemy type and you'll collect their soul, which can then be equipped as an offensive weapon, guardian or stat modifier depending on its colour. These bestow protagonist Soma with a similar attack to the defeated enemy, and collecting each of the 116 souls in the game quickly becomes an obsessive pursuit, positively encouraged by virtue of a wireless soul trading/swapping feature.

Other than this, the game mostly sidesteps meaningful use of the DS's unique capabilities. The top screen is set to either map or enemy profiler: timesaving but unnecessary. Similarly, touchscreen features are rudimentary, awkwardly bolted on to *Castlevania* mechanics despite attempts to paper over the joins. Most overtly, you must use the stylus to finish boss encounters. Once the antagonist's health has been suitably depleted, a symbol appears that must be traced within a strict time limit. Fail to accurately draw the seal, or do so outside the time limit, and the boss regains some health and the battle irritatingly continues.

Collected soul abilities vary wildly in usefulness, and the urge to collect the most powerful ones is heightened by the sky-high difficulty level. It treads a dangerous line, inspiring infuriation and infatuation in almost equal measure but always feeding the keen player just enough reward.

Core gameplay remains largely undeveloped from *Symphony Of The Night*, and, despite the additions, is aspirational rather than inspirational. It's certainly the best handheld *Castlevania* game, but Igarashi's team is too dedicated to the framework he masterminded for this to be anything innovatory. That said, *Dawn Of Sorrow* never feels outdated; it's mature and refined but neither close enough in imitation nor bold enough in reinvention to reach the greatness to which it clearly aspires. **[7]**

Soul food



The acquisition of souls frequently seems, in practice, to be random. The problem with such unsystematic development is the game's difficulty level; you can often find yourself working through a section of the castle, collecting souls with very little effort and integrating the new skills into your gameplay style, only to die before the next save room. On replay, you may find it far harder to collect the same souls as you did before you expired, having to enter and re-enter rooms in order to make certain types of enemies respawn until they eventually give up the ghost.



Dawn Of Sorrow is self-referential to the nth degree. Almost every painting, snippet of remixed audio and lavish room is a nod to a *Castlevania* past, and would-be videogame historians will relish such attention to detail



About a quarter of the way in you'll acquire the ability to switch between two different costume set-ups at will. This way, with one button press you can slice into an enemy with a broadsword then follow up with some short, sharp knife jabs. It's a clever idea, and one that should be used by more games





As always, the weapon roster is varied – ranging from quick attack knives to slow but mighty spears and broadswords. There are even some guns available, including the desirable RPG launcher reward for a time of under five minutes in a bonus boss rush mode



Inexplicably, Konami has decided to stray from the traditional highly detailed gothic style of illustration into middle-of-the-road anime fare. Thankfully, such artistic misdirection has not yet spread to the in-game visuals





GT LEGENDS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOV 4
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: SIMBIN

'Legend' faces becoming the most overused suffix since 'uncut', but here it means something. Many of *GTL*'s cars are actually legends: the 'Batmobile' BMW 3.0 CSL, the Sweeny-esque Jaguar Mk II, the Mini Cooper... Further, these are recreations of individual cars, complete with all their imperfections. Each of the 90-plus variations of 25 core models is a sensation to behold; and with SimBin wielding the spanners, their dynamics are no less impressive.

Although clearly sharing DNA – and nearly half its tracks – with SimBin's *GTR*, *GTL* is a very different drive. Rewritten physics means wild drifts are possible, and frequently required. Yet it's not dumbed down; it's just the way these cars are, and if *GTL* is more forgiving than *GTR* then reality is too. Catching and balancing slides in the less-friendly, higher-powered cars (such as the CSL or Pantera) as they tie themselves in knots is a major challenge. And a highly pleasureable one. It's also amusing to see the AI occasionally badly out of shape in front of you – look closely and you can even see wheels lifting right off the ground as, presumably, their feeble (and individually modelled) chassis twist.

There's another way it's more accessible than *GTR*: it's a game. Abandoning the 'here's everything, get on with it' sim approach, *GTL* has an unlockable structure. It's nothing revolutionary, but few games are easier to use. That said, players do spend a long time in slow cars (though they're still highly entertaining), there are no wet races and there should have been more full tracks rather than club/national/international variations. It seems unlikely extra circuits will be downloadable, and that's a shame, yet there remain near countless hours of joy in this for driving enthusiasts. It's still a hardcore sim at heart – forgiving lower difficulties, sexy day/night effects and emotive cars aside – and those that rush in may miss the point. But explore and savour each passionately sculpted track and car, either solo or in the 16-player online mode, and there are few games to touch it. **[8]**





One of the few underwhelming aspects of *GTL* is damage. A few parts will fly off, but remain bolt upright as they do so. The result is vaguely unsettling. Get the whole car airborne, however, and the excellent replays are sensational

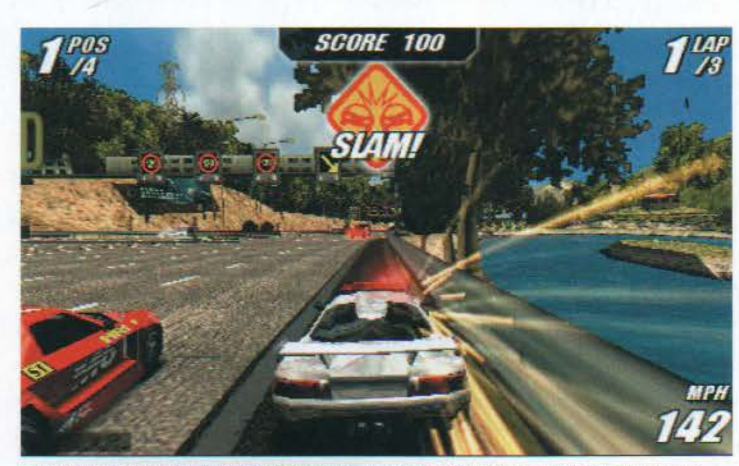
Most cars can be bought, though some, such as the Mercedes (#456) can only be won. But even without these, you're never short of drama – no one could be disappointed with this insane Corvette, for instance





BURNOUT LEGENDS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: CRITERION PREVIOUSLY IN: E151



Although the press screenshots would like you to think otherwise, the trademark motion blur is gone, presumably as a concession to the PSP's compact architecture. The remaining detail is still excellent

While the eagerness and ease with which dev teams are putting their signature games on the PSP continues to excite, it also frustrates; why rehash when the new handheld frontier provides unscorched, fertile earth for nourishing new concepts? That statement in fact holds the answer – an untested machine has its uncertainties, hence the *Racers*, *Pures*, *World Tours*, *Liberty City Stories* and, now, *Legends* of the PSP world. So EA has settled for this, a 'best of' compilation which cherry picks from the first three *Burnouts*. It's a perfect homage to the series' achievements and little is lost along the way – however, *Legends'* journey has scraped the sides a little.

On PSP everything has been made smaller, from the damage models through to the difficulty curve. In comparison to *Takedown*, the game has lost a layer of its graphical sheen (specifically, the blurry one) and a level of detail, too. Crashes are perhaps more predictable, with every window seemingly cracking in an identical fashion. There's less traffic, too – but that's more of a blessing than you'd think as pop-up and unstable textures prevail in this dinky version.

If it feels a touch formulaic, that's because the familiar *Burnout* DNA lies at *Legends'* core, and it's the one thing that has been totally uncompromised. The handling is near-identical to *Takedown* and the sense of speed (at least after a while – you must frustratingly unlock the meatier Muscle cars) hasn't been slowed. Crash mode's delicious challenge of calculated velocities, precise wrecklessness and searing trajectories remains, despite this being one area where the seemingly lower difficulty level has had its biggest impact.

This mix-tape *Burnout* does have a tendency to expose the series' foibles as well as its successes – the chance to revisit the older courses or the returning Pursuit mode with Aftertouch is welcome, but the camera remains as frustrating as ever, uninfluenced by *Revenge*'s refinements. And there's nothing here to keep you away from the bigger brother versions, unless you're always playing away from home. In such environments, however, it's a solid tribute to a storming series. **[7]**





Boosting into a crash or jump – either in the Crash mode or proper races – is still a thrill, even if miniaturisation has made things feel easier



DOUBLE-STEAL: THE SECOND CLASH

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: ¥6,500 (£33)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: BUNKASHA GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E153



It was competitive multiplayer that allowed the maddening obstructions and deceptions of *Midtown Madness 3*'s intricate environment to become the game's essence. The catharsis of seeing and hearing your opponent implode beneath the pressure justified those moments when the roles were frustratingly reversed. With little beyond train-set AI, thoughtless missions and an atrocious physics engine to complement its similar world, *The Second Clash* – a sequel to the Xbox launch title known in the west as *Wreckless* – hasn't so much mishandled that balance of pain and pleasure as surrendered it.

By the series' apparent reckoning, designs such as *Die Hard Trilogy* and *Super Runabout* need never progress so long as they're staged in environments that increasingly complicate the challenge. This isn't necessarily a flawed ideology, but then neither is *Second Clash* a wholly successful argument for it. Timed point-to-point collection, interception and destruction derby missions are viable propositions, even in this *Burnout*-obsessed age, but as



For all its simplicity, *Second Clash* offers a wide range of vehicles to both battle and unlock, even if they do make for better trophies than toys



As architecturally elaborate as it may seem, the arcadey vision of Chicago reveals its rough edges once its cars and pedestrians lurch into action

they're undone here by the game's abstract view of gravity (many vehicles barrel roll and even skyrocket with alarming ease), omnipresent dead ends and demonstrations of often sheer creative lethargy, the arcadey sweetness begins to sour.

Second Clash is a decent-looking title, Bunkasha still having a good eye for the balance of overbright, texture resolution, reflection and geometric complexity, even if the cost is a sensation of speed that the game's subsequent use of blurring fails to convincingly replace. A further glut of heavy-handed filters succeed in livening up replays, but also strengthen the belief that the developer's eye for frivolity would be better directed elsewhere. For those unperturbed by its often merciless simplicity and exacerbating flaws, the game at least surpasses its genre's average hour duration while working in some unexpected minigames. As an overall singleplayer experience, however, *Double-STEAL* still labours in pursuit of aged genre classics such as 1999's *Driver*, remaining too narrow-minded in scope to pick up the required speed and too crass in execution to maintain that chosen course. **[4]**



BET ON SOLDIER: BLOOD SPORT

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DIGITAL JESTERS DEVELOPER: KYLOTONN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E152

Bet On Soldier is playing the Running Man card of combat-for-audiences, while at the same time attempting to create a backdrop of worldwide carnage and Forever War soldiery. The resulting quagmire is quite bizarre, and that's not in a good way. Your lone hero (like a production-line Bruce Campbell, drained of all irony) is out for revenge, on an ill-conceived TV show that appears to have been bolted on top of a firstperson shooter from a previous generation.

Those unfortunate few who played the pretty-but-pretty-awful PC shooter *Iron Storm* will find themselves with a strong sense of déjà vu, because the weapons, combat and environments are all painfully similar. Even the enemies that take a dozen too many bullets before they topple to the ground are close cousins to *Iron Storm*'s unhappy mannequins.

For reasons that must be clear only in the minds of its creators, *Bet On Soldier* delivers cash for corpses, and as you rack up dozens of unpleasant kills with syrupy, clumsy weapons, your wallet grows fat. Throughout the corridors and enemy bases there are incongruous terminals at which armour can be bought and games can be saved. *Bet On Soldier* is the kind of weird and uncomfortable mix of ideas that only a second-rate game would ever attempt to stick together, with unintentional nonsense filling the gaps between the lifeless point-and-shoot action with moments of sad silliness. The TV show segue scenes, where your standard shooter action is momentarily



Little thought has been put into the duels themselves, which have nothing more than greater hit points and bigger guns attached to the otherwise predictably familiar mercenaries

supplanted by an uninspired one-on-one match against an opponent of your choice, really only adds a splash of the surreal to this otherwise pedestrian shooter.

Bet On Soldier's terrible and obvious design flaws – like not being able to interrupt the painfully slow loading of the shotgun – are only emphasised by all the other low production values: poor AI, foolish animation and awful narrative. The voice-acting is precariously bad, betraying a nonsense script that was acted out unthinkingly by ham-voiced performers, and which regularly falls on the wrong side of absurdity. No matter how much colour *Bet On Soldier* throws at the screen, it is still hamstrung by its fundamentals.

Bet On Soldier's non-linearity of progression, its riot-shield combat and internationally ranging scenarios suggest a game that might well have looked exciting on the drawing board. The final production, however, will leave anyone better off putting their money on the dogs. **[3]**





BOS is packed with appealing environments, which just goes to show that pretty much any game can hire good level designers. The action that fills those levels, however, is sloppy and thoughtless





DEATH JR

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), NOV 18 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: BACKBONE ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Death Jr, with its default unlimited-ammo twin pistols and broad, comically oversized scythe swipes, has the loftiest of intentions. It clearly aims to be the schoolyard *Devil May Cry*, but apart from these loose similarities in combat design, fails roundly to capture any of Dante's style and depth.

It's testament to the game's fundamental failings that one of the first valuable strategies you'll learn to exploit when encountering a new wave of enemies is simply to hang back, letting the bone-thin AI careen a quarter off ledges and into lava pits, or allowing the frantically active kamikaze wraiths to panic and explode, eliminating a good number of your foes with them. Those enemies left behind, each with just the faintest traces of exploitable weaknesses, are too frequently spawned either out of your range (though not of theirs), silently behind you, making cheap surprise attacks an aggravating fact of life, or simply in such haphazard variety and number that any semblance of strategic advantage is lost the moment the game introduces the advanced weaponry which would otherwise prove useful.

In these most hectic moments, the only thing thrashing more blindly than DJ's catch-all swarm-breaking scythe is the game's camera, uncontrollable save for a centering shoulder button click, which proves unpredictable and, given the intentional twists and skews of the level design, often disorienting. Its lazy roaming mode allows DJ to walk sideways and even toward the camera without shifting the view, making precise platforming either a series of blind unfaithful leaps, hoping to compensate for unintentional miscalculation with DJ's slow spinning descent, or a senseless series of firstperson directional corrections, made all the more maddening by the unadjustable over-sensitivity of the analogue stick.

It's probable – and ultimately disheartening – that *Death Jr's* problems may have been alleviated were its console mindset not shoehorned into the more restrictive control configurations the PSP offers. Even with just an additional pair of buttons for camera movement, a broad swatch of irritations could have been avoided, but as it is, *Death Jr* is recommended only for forgiving platformer enthusiasts. **[4]**



Keep your enemies in front of you – so long as you can see them, they're fair game for a lock-on. DJ's at his weakest when surrounded, and fast turns in the heat of battle are near-impossible without stopping and centring the camera

Just as skeletal as Death Jr himself is the ongoing narrative. After the game's rendered and fully voiced introduction, there's nothing but periodic, awkwardly placed and mere seconds-long cutscenes, leaving no room for any character development for the supporting cast or explanation of the game's locales



PAC 'N' ROLL

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£17)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), OCT 28 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Little in the first 20-odd stages can prepare you for the last few. While shockingly difficult in comparison, they're also the best the game has to offer

Though the comparisons seem obvious, in actuality *Pac 'N' Roll* has little in common with either *Marble Madness* or *Super Monkey Ball*. Where both present their challenge physically, and consistently reward risky behaviour, *Pac 'N' Roll* keeps its velocity constantly under the rigid control of a stylus stroke, and allows you one foot on the brake at all times – rarely will you find yourself out of control at the mercy of momentum.

Thanks to the Pac-ball's leaden movement, throughout the majority of the game's first four worlds the challenge is quite thin, the tension low, and the game plays instead as a simple experiment in interface as you explore the heavily ramped and platformed environments at your leisure, performing the usual dot collection and ghost pursuit. It's unfortunate that it's not until the final world that the game delivers its most creatively built levels, pitting Pac against tricky timed jumps and speeding him up over collapsing hills, and instead seems to rely more on nostalgic familiarity as its motivator.

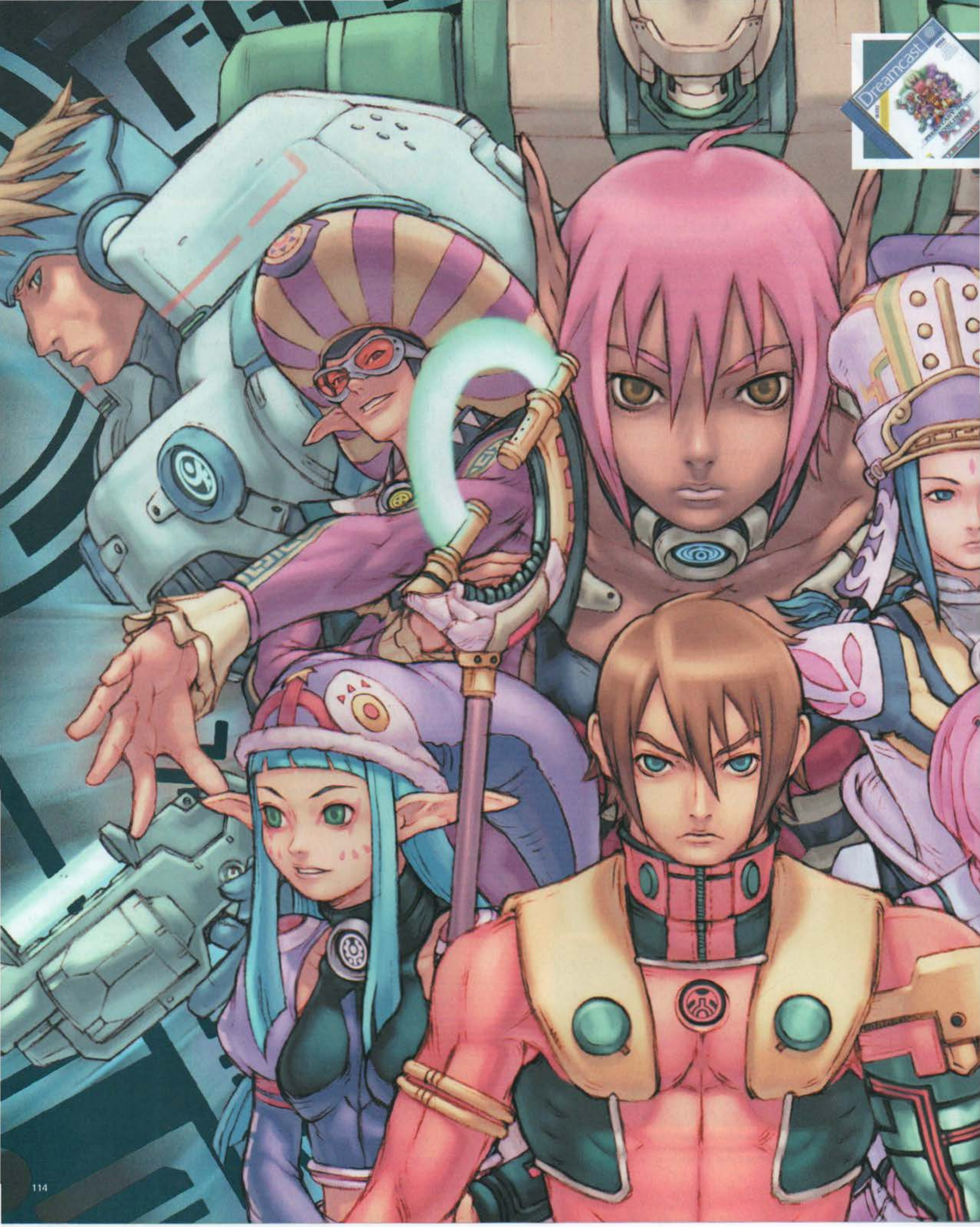
In addition to the standard story mode, each stage has a reconfigured version of itself playable as a time trial. These trials are easily the most challenging part of the game, requiring extraordinary stylus skills to manoeuvre through the level's obstacles at the full speed necessary for first place, but regardless, as with so many other games, the trials never feel more like more than what they are – quickly transparent attempts at extending the life of the title without adding content where it's needed the most. The game's unlockable challenge modes, while providing a welcome reimagining of the level's goals, are hastily added and rarely satisfying.

Even with these challenges and time trials, *Pac 'N' Roll* is regrettably short and, with few rules to master, its replayability is quite limited. With the DS's library rapidly expanding beyond minigame collections and touchscreen experiments it's a tough sell, but as a fast, cheap diversion there's enough simple fun in exploration to make it worthwhile. **[6]**





Rather than dying, being captured by a ghost starts a minigame, but the environments are generally wide enough to make avoidance easy


Dreamcast

TIME EXTEND

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

FORMAT: **SEGA**
PUBLISHER: **IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)**
DEVELOPER: **DREAMCAST**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2000**

Sega's early steps into online gaming may have cost it dear, but the Dreamcast's crowning achievement still puts newer efforts to shame

It's a gaming phenomenon: a high-fantasy adventure with a vibrantly distinct art style, attracting an unprecedented number of newcomers to the world of online gaming – the first of its kind to earn an **Edge** 9/10. Déjà vu? Before *World Of WarCraft* there was another game which swept an adoring audience before it: Sega's masterful *Phantasy Star Online*.

On the face of it, it was a disastrous plan for an MMO. A console with no voice communication and no bundled keyboard. A time when most players had a pay-per-minute internet connection. A game aiming to hold players' attention for dozens of hours that had only four different areas. Limited weapons, limited costumes, limited quests. Parties of four traversing the same territory over and over again. Expectations may have been lower in 2000, but it still sounded like an idea whose ambition outweighed the available technology.

But that isn't what people experienced. People still talk about Ragol like it's real. People made friends they still talk to every day. People still stop in their tracks when they hear the music. That's because the available technology, for all its limitations, provided extraordinary things. A truly international community, for one, allowing players to dip in and out of conversations across the globe. A world that crackled with colour and life.

It was a disastrous plan for an MMO. A console with no voice communication and no bundled keyboard. A time when most players had a pay-per-minute internet connection

It's often hard to reconcile the two images we're left with of the Dreamcast. For many, now, it's a luminous memory – the last summer of a time when it really was all about the games. But its place in history is that of a failure – a squat, white albatross around the neck of Sega's hardware hopes. But whether you look at the frustrating facts and ugly figures or instead remember the wonder and amazement, one thing can't be denied. When someone got it right – and that someone was often, although not always, Sega – the



While many remember Ragol's sylvan Forest levels most fondly, the Mines proved most effective at showing off the colour depth of Sega's hardware



Although some sections of *PSO* benefited from more complex coordination between team members – switch puzzles, mostly – on the whole it was a case of one-for-all combat and mob-handed exploration



Although Ragol contains only four zones, the contrasts within each are dramatic. Moving from the hot monoto of the early Caves (above) to the cool, rainbow-drippe caverns of the later sections (left) gives a real sense of progression and adds to the organic feel of *PSO*'s worl

PSO VER. 5

PSO may have felt unusually fresh, but Sega certainly got its money's worth out of the title. After releasing a tweaked 'Ver. 2' of the original Dreamcast game, the full package was released on GameCube and Xbox. Despite the addition of splitscreen cooperative modes and some new areas, the game never quite felt the same. Later PC versions (*Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst*) provide a quick fix for those who still yearn for the camaderie and beauty of Ragol's strange adventures.

Dreamcast enjoyed a kind of symbiosis with its software that few consoles could match. *Super Mario 64* may have been the perfect expression of what made the N64 special, and a copy of *Halo* may be an essential component of the Xbox, but with the right game in the drive, the Dreamcast seemed to hum with renewed power.

How is it that titles as diverse as *Jet Set Radio, Soul Calibur, Samba De Amigo, Shenmue, Skies Of Arcadia, Rez* and *Metropolis Street Racer* can all feel like the defining Dreamcast game? No matter how ill-fated the console itself, there was always the sense that it had been designed around the company's software ambitions. This wasn't a machine put together by hardware experts, whose software would gradually explore its potential as it marched on towards inevitable obsolescence. This was kit assembled around a company whose teams were ready from the start to explode with creativity, taking the best of their arcade instincts and the freshest of their new ideas to reshape home console play.

The result was software like *Phantasy Star Online*. Unmistakably firstparty in its scope and excellence, making it nearly broke Yuji Naka. He still talks with exhaustion about trying to sustain the game in the face of the stress its players placed on it. His team's efforts were worth it, however, producing a game of such irresistibly immersive solidity that players rose to the occasion whenever it fell short of all it might have been.

From the first moments, that attention to detail showed – the sound effects and loading screens creating the impression of a complete world waiting to be discovered, rather than a lumpy transition between reality and awkward fantasy. The







PSO relies mostly on requiring players to kill a succession of spawning enemies before moving on to the next room. It's a relentlessly simple mechanic which makes most soloing unrewarding work

characters waiting to be selected were a bizarrely eclectic cast – part android, part harlequin, part Camelot – but somehow everyone found something that suited them. The odd grace of the available avatars set the tone for people's behaviour in-game. There was something peculiarly courtly about the long gowns and formal armour, and it encouraged a sense of chivalry from the off. And if players couldn't quite fix on a combination which suited their tastes, they might find their personalities modulating to fit their eventual appearance.

The characters waiting to be selected were a bizarrely eclectic cast – part android, part harlequin, part Camelot – but somehow everyone found something that suited them

The same was true of communicating within the game. Many players hadn't invested in a Dreamcast keyboard, and relying on anything other than a few stock phrases was patently unrealistic when using the in-game typing system. Even if you were fully equipped, many early adopters found themselves playing with non-English speakers, communicating as best they could through gifts and clumsy smilies. And, even with a keyboard and an English-speaking party, there were few who could master playing while typing.

It should have put the game at a disadvantage, but instead became an unexpected strength. For a start, it effectively outlawed the kind of absent-minded chit-chat that can undermine the atmosphere of even the most sophisticated online world. Words were precious, not least because what you said would hover over your head for long seconds, potentially polluting with crass trivia a gameworld where every other pixel was deliberate and artful. It's striking that even when the move to Xbox allowed voice communication, most *PSO* veterans shunned it. But, for many, finding a way to balance being a good player with being good company proved impossible to manage alone, and this brought a strange new community into the world of *PSO*: the typers. The beauty of Ragol meant spectating was such good sport that flatmates, girlfriends and boyfriends were willing to be drafted in as stenographers, taking dictation from players and adding their own occasional asides as they too became friends with the players (and typers) who made up the party.

There's no question that it was the beauty of the world that attracted these onlookers. It's an odd truism that for all people claim stories matter to them in games, they talk about them very rarely. *PSO* is no different. Although it was hard not to wish the inhabitants of the Pioneer 2 well, or to quell your curiosity about Red and all the trouble she'd caused, her story mattered little to most players. Place was far more important, and with only four main zones, *PSO* ran a real risk of monotony. But rather than the ice, fire, beach and castle areas that lesser games would have fallen back on, Ragol's geography had a variety and cohesion that worked to emphasise the sense of a real ecology at the same time as it reflected the shifting plot. Just as the brightness of the Forest faded to gloomy squalls, the blandness of the Caves deepened to more mysterious caverns. Early stages of the Mines may have displayed a fairly straight, if dazzling, take on alien technology, but their later stages had hints of the arcane which served as perfect preparation for the spooky grandeur of the Ruins. And throughout these areas, the creatures you met were convincingly interconnected: the similarities of the dumb forest Boomas to the dark and deadly Dimenians didn't just give you cues on how to handle them in combat: they underpinned the story of a natural world twisted and warped by the events that had unfolded there.





The Pioneer 2 was a lively and very useful hub, and Sega regularly staged timely events in its halls, draping the futurist scenery with Valentine's hearts or Easter presents depending on the seasons





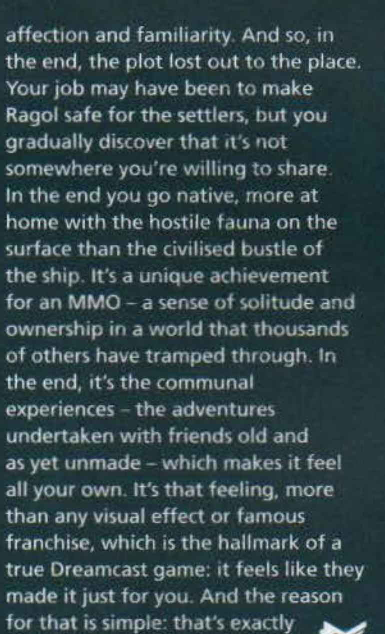
The game's final battle was the epic struggle against Dark Falz (above), which opened in a tranquil meadow (top) that was every bit as eerie as taking a trip to the moon at the end of *Zelda: Majora's Mask*

But even without the context and sense of progression, every frame of *PSO* was breathtaking. Even on a hundredth visit, the turquoise fizz of the Mines still amazes. Even as a veteran, leading a newcomer to the hidden waterfall chamber still excites. Even with old friends, conversation dies away as you catch glimpses of the world beyond the windows of the Ruins. There was little in the preceding *Phantasy Star* series to prepare players for such vibrancy. Despite the establishment of the science-fantasy tone, and the colourful chunkiness of the Mega Drive games, there was nothing foreshadowing the sumptuous detail of Ragol. Despite later revisions on more powerful consoles, nothing but the Dreamcast was equal to capturing the radiant solidity of *PSO*'s world.

Those Mega Drive games did make their influence felt, however, in the game's weakest element: its combat. The conversion from tactical, turn-based battles to full-action fighting may have been a necessary step to take the game into three dimensions, but the result showed up the team's unfamiliarity with action games. The zangk zangk ZANGK monotony of the triple-attack combo was claimed by some as therapeutic, but there was no disguising its dullness. Auto-targeting could be erratic at close range, and battle



Every player's trusty Mag could unleash spectacular, but sometimes frustratingly mis-aimed, special attacks. Essential in a pinch, however



Views from the windows of the Ruins (above) were visual high points for many players, but the architecture throughout the game was bewitching, giving a real sense of alien antiquity throughout the different zones

tactics usually relied on nothing more sophisticated than running from one end of the room to another, stretching enemies out into convenient queues of obedient stooges. Even as a team, fights were usually tests of concentration and common sense, rather than skill or strategy. It was only against bosses that sustained coordination and communication was required, although even these were patchy: the exhilaration of besting Dark Falz was equalled in intensity by the relief of banishing the brutally repetitive De Rol Le.

Nor did item and equipment management fill the cerebral gap left by the combat. Maximising the potential of your Mag took some figuring out, but most players were likely to turn to GameFAQs rather than laboriously exhaust the possibilities of feeding them every combination of items. And, while equipping the right combination of items required a fairly challenging process of stat-juggling, there was little that had a major impact on the way you played the game.

But the heritage that *PSO* did benefit from was the mythos of the Hunter. *PSO*'s players weren't competing heroes – certainly not to begin with. They were employees, professionals, equals. It added an immediate sense of camaraderie to the world, as well as fostering a tone of courtesy and respect which only the most determined of PKers betrayed. Encountering NPC Hunters on Ragol – whether rivals or victims – strengthened that bond, that sense of purpose. It gave you a connection to the world which most RPGs, with their recurrent storylines of wandering world-savers, fail to deliver. Another hallmark, the music, which had always been striking, took a new turn – ambient, orchestral and absorbing – creating atmosphere as powerfully as the game's visual imagination.

Atmosphere is often talked of as a bolt-on extra in games, as an inconsequential bonus. For this truly pioneering game, it was as central as its most fundamental mechanics

Atmosphere is often talked of as a bolt-on extra in games, as an inconsequential bonus. For this truly pioneering game, it was as central as its most fundamental mechanics. You didn't pick up the controller to play *PSO*, you picked up the controller to take a trip to the planet's surface. As the sense of wonder and exploration faded, it was replaced with a much more enduring sense of affection and familiarity. And so, in the end, the plot lost out to the place. Your job may have been to make Ragol safe for the settlers, but you gradually discover that it's not somewhere you're willing to share. In the end you go native, more at home with the hostile fauna on the surface than the civilised bustle of the ship. It's a unique achievement for an MMO – a sense of solitude and ownership in a world that thousands of others have tramped through. In the end, it's the communal experiences – the adventures undertaken with friends old and as yet unmade – which makes it feel all your own. It's that feeling, more than any visual effect or famous franchise, which is the hallmark of a true Dreamcast game: it feels like they made it just for you. And the reason for that is simple: that's exactly what they did.



SIGN LANGUAGE

PSO was always conceived as a global game, and Sonic Team worked hard to help communication along – providing automatic translations of set phrases. However, the most universal language was the emotes you could create yourself. A forerunner of *Forza*'s exhaustively flexible customisation system, it allowed you to create elaborate effects from a simple ingredient set of shapes and lines. It was a playful enough process to almost operate as a game in its own right, and the subtleties of its construction system could teach as much about the basics of cartooning as any number of hefty texts on the subject. Emotes could also be shared with others, creating a very visual sense of team identity.





Finding (and improving) your ideal weapon was one of the biggest motivations in the game, although some – like the frying pan (right) – were played for laughs. Some bigger enemies were armed as impressively as the players

THE MAKING OF...
ZARCH

When one of the men behind Elite took a short break on a planet, the results were spectacular. We take a look at David Braben's *other* classic

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **ACORN ARCHIMEDES** PUBLISHER: **ACORNSOFT** DEVELOPER: **DAVID BRABEN** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1987**

In early 1987, things were not going quite to plan. **David Braben** and Ian Bell were still working together on the sequel to their massive critical and commercial hit, *Elite*. Enthusiasm was waning, however, and they weren't making much progress.

Through friends at Acorn, Braben had heard about a new machine in the pipeline, something altogether far more powerful than the aging BBC. The Acorn Archimedes was in an entirely new and exciting league. "I asked if I could get my hands on one, and they asked me if I could do something they could use for promoting the machine," recalls Braben. This was certainly going to be a change of pace from the slow development of the epic sequel. He would have only three months to produce a complete game. In the end, he made two.

"What happened is that I did a game called *Lander*, which was given away free with the Archimedes. This had to be ready in double-quick time as it had to go on a disk and be duplicated to ship with the machine."

The short timescale meant that an *Elite*-style epic was out of the question. Braben grabbed ingredients already to hand, and mixed them together with a strong dose of technical ambition. He decided to take an idea he'd worked with some years earlier on Acorn's Atom (the company's first home machine) called *Meteors*, and update it for its latest.

The short timescale meant Braben grabbed ingredients already to hand, and mixed them together with a strong dose of ambition

Meteors was never available commercially, but it's not difficult to picture the *Asteroids*-inspired game. The player's rotating and thrusting ship now battled against gravity above a planet's surface, in the same tradition of other titles such as *Thrust* and *Oids*. Braben decided to keep the eponymous rocks, which also came under gravity's influence, raining down on the player and shattering when they hit the planet's surface. It was a simple concept, but straightforward and satisfying to play.

Lander would be a three-dimensional version of *Meteors*. The simple *Asteroids* 'V' would be replaced by a 'hoverplane' reminiscent of a ship from *Elite*. Shots fired forward, and thrust





CONTROL FREAKERY

Despite critical and commercial success, *Zarch* had a number of design issues that weren't quite perfected. The most immediately noticeable was the unusual control system. Moving the mouse left and right did not rotate the hoverplane; instead the player indicated which compass direction they wanted to point at, and the ship would swing around accordingly. Greater movement resulted in a steeper angle. Unfortunately, it was extremely sensitive.

"It was a bit of a git," Braben admits. "It was so much dependent on how good your mouse was. In some cases [it was] virtually unplayable. You could play it on keyboard, don't forget." Despite this, once the system became familiar you could pull off exciting manoeuvres. Following feedback from fans, Braben decided to keep it for the sequel. "I think *Virus* is easier, but it's still an absolute git."

came from the base. To move the craft the player dipped the nose in the direction they wanted to go, and simply applied thrust. The steeper the angle of the nose, the more they would accelerate horizontally, at the expense of height. With movement in place, all that was needed was to turn a simple line into a landscape. Then he could start throwing rocks at it.

The Archimedes was an entirely new machine. Centred on a custom-designed 32bit RISC processor, it clearly had power, but Braben would have to figure out how it worked as he went along. As it turned out, a lot of it didn't. "I was actually doing all the programming through the BBC because the machine was missing its operating system," he explains. "It didn't even have a disk drive, that's how basic it was."

Gallingly, the final machine promised features that would dramatically speed up 3D applications, but were missing from the machine Acorn supplied to Braben: "In the prototype version of the chip, the multiply operation just didn't work. It just wasn't there. It didn't exist."



While Braben experimented with broader views, he discovered that the framerate suffered as a result. A dynamic system that was tried unexpectedly shrank the landscape whenever enemy craft appeared, and was dropped from the game

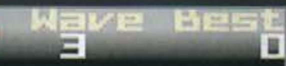
Nevertheless, he set to work realising what would become the game's most distinctive feature. As a graphical demonstration of the Archimedes' power, the landscape would be key.

"I already had ideas of how to do a patchwork landscape because I'd been playing around with ideas of how I might do it for the *Elite* game," he remembers. Freed from the constraints of the humble BBC, Braben realised that what had proved unsatisfactory before could really fly on the Archimedes. "Having a computer that could actually do it made life a whole lot easier," he says with typical understatement.

Lander's world painted an idyllic picture. It was a pleasure to just skim along the hilltops admiring the scenery. Game elements, such as score and fuel, were pushed unobtrusively to the top to let the world take centre stage. The solid, coloured graphics were a natural evolutionary step forwards, but were a world away from *Elite*'s cold vectors. Hills were lush with greenery, shading into yellow as the ground approached the water. Beach tents and houses were scattered around, giving a sense of scale, life and human warmth. The Archimedes' range of 256 colours allowed a unique degree of subtlety. Lighting effects meant that hills had bright and shady sides, and everything faded smoothly into the distance. Everything in the world cast a realistic shadow – critical for correctly judging height and position, but so natural as to be completely unobtrusive. Despite being able to see that the surface was only paper-thin, it felt real.

This patchwork of hills, valleys and lakes, as with the solar systems in *Elite*, were dynamically generated. This was essential if they were ever to be used in another multiple-galaxy epic, and here allowed Braben to put together a range of worlds quickly and simply. The heights of the regularly sized tiles were determined by deforming the flat planet with a series of sine waves, all shooting off in random directions. With a few of these, the landscape looked artificial, like an egg box, but as the number and variety increased it took on a more natural appearance without losing its smooth, rolling quality. Values below a certain height were capped and marked as water, giving a constant sea level and further breaking up the unnatural regularity. It was clear that Braben was enjoying his work.

"When you're presented with such a fancy toy, a gadget freak's gadget, what I wanted to be spending my time on was playing around with the rendering





With the conversion to 16bit computer platforms (Amiga, PC and ST – later, there were also Amstrad, C64 and Spectrum ports) Braben took the chance to rename the game *Virus*. He'd never been keen on *Zarch*, claiming it "sounds like a soap powder"

features, because it was such an opportunity." Of course, as with many of the best boys' toys, Braben had constructed a delightfully neat and well-ordered world in order to smash it up.

"The initial idea was making the landscape deform, so you end up with it becoming ever more cratered," he recalls. "That didn't really happen to the extent I wanted it to." Unfortunately, in what has become a familiar problem since, the design that had worked so well for *Meteors* didn't quite take to the added dimension. Although successful as a graphical demonstration, *Lander* couldn't really hold the player's interest. There was a lot of potential there, and the ship and landscape were impressive, but it needed more game.

"*Zarch* is quite a different game, but it used the same landscape infrastructure," explains Braben. At first glance the two games appear identical, but this similarity is superficial. In play, they are very different. With *Lander* sent off for mastering and testing after only two months, Braben had only a month left, so this reuse was a crucial step.

Fortunately, he was now equipped with an upgraded prototype system, featuring such luxuries as its own keyboard, and development could now proceed at a rapid pace.

"Conceptually there were a lot of different elements that fed into *Zarch*," says Braben. "All sorts of things from *Defender* to *Space Invaders*. Because the development period was so tight I had to go for things that were relatively safe to code and weren't going to cause massive gameplay problems."

Braben chose to update his favourite elements from the classics: "I love the idea in *Defender* where you're attacked by a craft that's relatively easy to deal with, and yet it suddenly goes mutant and it's a pig to deal with. Those concepts all feed in. Like *Galaxian*, where the things swoop around. Things that are fun in these games. They'd be fun to realise in 3D."

"I love the idea in Defender where you're attacked by a craft that's relatively easy to deal with, and then it mutates and it's a pig"

The lush landscape was brought more into *Zarch*'s gameplay. The tranquil, Eden-like world became slowly distorted by virus particles spread by the invaders, becoming covered in angry red lesions as a Seeder passed overhead.

"I loved the idea of a landscape that gradually became corrupted," Braben states. "Every landscape item either mutates or dies or something special happens."

These additions changed a demonstration into a frantic battle. The player would climb higher and higher to tackle an incoming Fighter, then spiral towards the ground to destroy a lone parked Seeder, turning sharply and firing the braking jets just inches above the ground.

In true arcade fashion, defeat was inevitable. You simply kept going for as long as possible, occasionally rewarded with new missiles, landscapes or extra hoverplanes. To add more of a challenge, every few levels the gravity would also increase, playing havoc with your expectations of how the hoverplane handled.

The critics and public loved it. The free copy of *Lander* with every Archimedes proved a useful demo not only for the machine's power, but also for the charms of *Zarch*. It rapidly became, and stayed, the platform's best-selling game. Unfortunately, the machine was expensive and never truly found its place in gamer's hearts. This scarcity made the game unobtainable for many, and it would remain a whispered legend in the playground, at least until the following year when a renamed and tweaked *Virus* appeared for the 16bit machines.

Zarch's elegant simplicity became not just a demonstration of the Archimedes' power, but was a flag bearer for the new generation of 3D games. It gave us hope and reassurance. It was going to be all right: you *could* combine gameplay and stunning graphics. This was the future, and it looked good.



GET DOWN, SHIP

Despite the obvious attractions of *Zarch*'s landscape, the sensible player spent their time trying to get as far away from it as possible.

"Because of the way the mouse control works, the tendency is to shoot downwards," Braben explains. "You end up in a war of height against the bad guys. Inevitably you end up leaving the ground behind." Unfortunately, with little time available to rethink the entire design and control system, there wasn't much that could be done. "We appreciated that fairly early on, which was one of the reasons we made sure that the Seeders land. You have to come quite low to shoot them."

Although this also introduces a game-enhancing tension, as the player must leave the safety of altitude, Braben admits there was an element of wanting to "rub the player's nose in the ground. Look at all this work I've done!"





While *Zarch*'s fixed camera did away with the need for extra controls, and allowed for several optimisations, flying and shooting out of the screen toward the camera could be disorientating

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Traveller's Tales

DATE FOUNDED: 1990

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 94

HEAD OF STUDIO: Jon Burton

KEY STAFF:
Dave Dootson (head of technology), James Cunliffe (head of art)





Lego Star Wars, produced with Giant, is one of Traveller's Tales' biggest successes to date

URL: www.t-tales.com



LOCATION:
Knutsford, UK
Oxford, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Chronicles Of Narnia (GC, PC, PS2, Xbox) 'and a wide variety of unannounced titles on all platforms'

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Mickey Mania (MD, PS, SNES), *Toy Story* (MD, SNES), *Sonic 3D* (MD, PC, Saturn), *Crash: Wrath Of Cortex* (PS1, Xbox), *Haven: Call Of The King* (PS2), *Finding Nemo* (GC, PS2, Xbox), *Crash: Twinsanity* (PS2, Xbox), *Lego Star Wars* (GC, PC, PS2, Xbox), *WRC* (PSP)

PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY:
"With experience built up over 15 years of best-selling titles, we integrate cutting-edge proprietary technology with a gameplay-focused toolset. Cross-platform in-game editors allow designers to modify levels as they play, and this approach keeps development in tune with the final game experience.

"Our in-house engine supports all major systems from PSP to PC, with development for next-generation platforms underway. On PS2, our high-speed burst renderer manages over 500,000 polygons per frame (over 34 million per second). We can display more than 250 fully lit, skinned and animated characters per frame, and over 2,000 characters in simple form for large battles.

"We also have a highly advanced particle system, full rigid body dynamics simulator and support for effects such as environment mapping, specular lighting and diffraction per poly and per pixel. At all times, though, our focus remains on uniting great artwork, great coding and great audio to create great games."





Mobile gets middleware

After a successful year in the US mobile gaming market, Ideaworks3D is preparing to become the Criterion of the industry by licensing out its development and networking technologies



Thor Gunnarsson, VP, business development, Ideaworks3D

www.ideaworks3D.com

Few companies have successfully managed to combine world-class game development with world-class tools development. Perhaps only Criterion and Epic qualify, and even in these cases, post-EA acquisition, Criterion is pulling back from its licensing business and becoming an in-house tools provider. Similarly, much of Epic's game development work, not least on the *Unreal Tournament* series, has been carried out with Canadian studio Digital Extremes. The problem, of course, is that the two elements – games and tools – are very different, both in terms of business models and the type of staff required. In the end, success in one arena tends to dominate the other.



Games and tools are very different, both in terms of business models and the type of staff required

It doesn't mean this isn't a good strategy to grow a company, however. With great technology and tools you can build better games, and as you make better games so you get more feedback about how you can improve your tools. For a couple of years, it can be a virtuous circle. And this is certainly the experience of London-based mobile expert Ideaworks3D.

Spun out from the London Business School during the net's boom years, it started out working with a publisher building a system to port PC games for web use. When those plans fell into disarray, the technology proved flexible enough to transfer to the mobile space.

"One of our founders had been doing work with what became Symbian, and we saw there would be convergence so set about focusing on the mobile space," explains vice president of business development **Thor Gunnarsson**. "Our technology allows us to take PC and console code and art assets and convert them in a short period of time. We can do a basic conversion from a console game to a mobile demo in four to six weeks."

And, as luck would have it, this was just at the same time as Nokia was planning to launch N-Gage, making the ability to port PC games to mobile a valuable commodity. So it was that Ideaworks3D ended up providing the N-Gage versions of *Tomb Raider*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* and *Pandemonium*, sharpening its Segundo3D porting technology in the process.

Now on its third iteration, Segundo3D remains at the heart of Ideaworks3D's game development. As is inherent in the company's name, it focuses on developing high-end 3D mobile games, and has been particularly successful in the US market during 2005.

"We've worked on a conversion of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* for Jamdat and Activision on Verizon's 3G V CAST service, and that was a number-one game," says Gunnarsson. It's since been replaced at the top of the charts by Ideaworks3D's version of *Need For Speed Underground 2* for EA, and the company is also



One of Ideaworks3D's earliest titles was the N-Gage conversion of *Tomb Raider*, which was the first mobile title to feature downloadable ghosts



working on a mobile version of *The Sims 2* (see 'I'm in your pocket').

But switching back to a technology point of view, this level of activity has convinced Gunnarsson that Segundo3D has become mature enough to be made available for thirdparty licensing. During four years of development it's become a much more fully featured technology with modules including software and hardware rendering, audio and various preprocess tools such as art exporters, profilers and scene optimisers. Most important in this respect is the DERBH compression tool – something vital in mobile gaming where small device memory combined with increasing bandwidth makes streaming content the best option.

"A game like the N-Gage version of *Tomb Raider* was originally 37Mb but we managed to get it down to 5.5Mb," Gunnarsson explains. "Advanced longbuffering techniques might get it down to 9Mb, but that would require a 3Mb decompression buffer. With DERBH, our decompression buffer is 250Kb, which is vital for mobile devices."

Such techniques have underpinned Ideaworks3D's success on the V CAST service, where games are streamed from Verizon's servers over 3G networks. "We're seeing download rates of around 250 kbits/second, which is DSL speed. It dramatically shifts the type of mobile games you can create," he enthuses.

The other piece of Ideaworks3D's technology puzzle is its Airplay networking service. As with Segundo3D, it was first blooded at the N-Gage's launch, providing the basic infrastructure for N-Gage Arena, Nokia's multiplayer lobby and matchmaking service. Since then, it has been further developed, becoming what Gunnarsson calls a commercial-grade platform. "In terms of the platform, it handles all the complexity of mobile gaming such as messaging, streaming content, digital rights management, billing as well as handling different handsets and networks. There's an SDK for developers to write to, but in terms of the business side I think the combination of Airplay and Segundo3D throws up some interesting future possibilities. We'll see mobile providing a bridge to console and PC games so people can see what's going on while they're on the move. For example, we're getting constant requests from massively multiplayer online game developers, especially in Korea, who are looking to create a mobile window on their games."

Even with mobile games, though, the wheels of industry turn slowly. "We're taking to a few early partners about licensing Airplay and Segundo3D and hope to be commencing beta deals by the end of the year," Gunnarsson says. But it will be Christmas 2006 before gamers are able to get their hands on the results.









Ideaworks3D projects, clockwise from top left: ported from the original PS1 *THPS*, the mobile 3D version was released on Verizon's V CAST service; in terms of budget and staffing, *The Sims 2 Mobile* is the company's biggest game to date; the *F-Zero*-inspired N-Gage title *System Rush*; *Need For Speed Underground 2* is streamed over a 3G mobile network

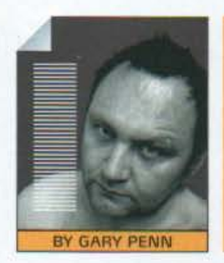


I'm in your pocket

Probably the most ambitious mobile game in development, *The Sims 2 Mobile* is providing Ideaworks3D with some interesting challenges. For one thing, there's the scale of development – a dozen staff and a schedule of over 12 months. There's also the issue of dealing with one of EA's most cherished brands; it's been working with Maxis, but bringing the expansive *Sims* universe to a mobile device is always going to be a tricky business.

There will be several versions of the game available from simple standalone Java games for entry-level phones to connected features for more complex devices. One neat feature in this regard will be the ability to transfer individual Sims that players have uploaded to *The Sims 2* website to their phones.

"The game is very much focused on characters and character customisation and doesn't rely on any previous knowledge of *The Sims*," Gunnarsson says. "Our design philosophy has been that most of the players may not know *The Sims* from their sim card, so it's focused on simple progression as you start the game, play the tutorials and then it gets deeper. But if you're an existing Sims player you'll have the option to upload your character straight away."



MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

True love

You never forget your first love. There might be other more intense or fleeting passions, but the first is special. Mine was *Defender*. Sure, a decade before I'd been enamoured by the novelty of controlling more than the channels and volume on the TV. But this was different. This wasn't infatuation. This was the real thing. Twu wuv.

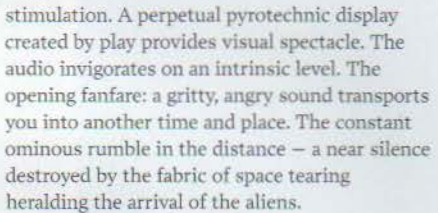
We met in a fairground. She sat alone in a darkened corner, showing what she had to offer for ten pence a shot. I had a fiver to last the evening. In less than 30 minutes I was spent, with nothing but adolescent adulation and a lust for more. I had to watch others get fucked just to see her in action. I envied those who could play, who could keep their shit together and keep playing, who became at one with the machine and reached nirvana.

You lose yourself in a sensory orgy. Your eyes, ears and hands are hyperactive with stimulation. A perpetual pyrotechnic display created by play provides visual spectacle. The audio invigorates on an intrinsic level. The opening fanfare: a gritty, angry sound transports you into another time and place. The constant ominous rumble in the distance – a near silence destroyed by the fabric of space tearing heralding the arrival of the aliens.

The bass roar of a mighty engine's thrust, a lethal stream of crackling lightning-bolt laser fire and the thunderous boom of smartbombs. The elements are in your hands. The pulsing, rising, arousing fanfare celebrates your earning an extra life and smartbomb. 'Game Over' is met with a respectful silence.

Playing is like driving a highly responsive, powerful sports car with manual gears, rapidly accelerating and performing exhilarating handbrake turns. The controls take some mastering, but the incentive comes from how good it feels to rise and swoop, to fly as free as a bird or flit like a frisky fish. Successful play is an exercise in restraint, controlling the strong urge to fly full throttle, finger to the metal, frantically pounding the laser button. You have to learn to ride this wild stallion.

Defender's microcosm was unusual not just because the camera was so close to the action and had to pan to keep up with play, which meant the whole was only ever visible through the radar. The difference with *Defender* is that life outside what you see is going on without consideration for you – often ignoring you. The aliens aren't all always out to get you. You aren't necessarily the centre of attention. The Humanoids are.



"She sat in a corner, showing what she had to offer for ten pence. I had a fiver to last the evening. In less than 30 minutes I was spent"

Defender's aliens behave like wildlife. There's a sense of a cohesive system, a little machine of menace, aliens working together, each with a unique role and complementary performance.

Landers and Humanoids both silently follow the rugged planet surface, the Landers hunting their Humanoid prey, their threatening cries accompanying every slow and sometimes inaccurate projectile they unleash. Until they move in for the kill and become aggressive, defensive even, spitting wildly. The abducted Humanoid cries out but your attempt to compensate for your negligence is futile and the air is filled with the erratic angry growling of a hybrid of Lander and Humanoid: a Mutant.

Bombers and Pods roam casually, aimlessly, silently, the former leaving deadly shit in their wake, the latter hornet nests waiting to be broken open. When released, the Swarmers pause briefly before snapping into life, darting towards the threat, spitting death and giggling.

Deadly silent Baiters wait in the wings, intolerant of intruders in their space for too long. You run out of time but you don't run out of play. You run into a Baiter. The system increases the pressure on you to perform. It gives you chances – warns you to move on.

There's tension as you tread on eggshells, a naked flame in a fireworks factory. Don't shoot the Humanoids you are trying to protect or you lose bonus points if you survive. But if all are lost, the game isn't. Instead, the planet explodes spectacularly, leaving you in a limbo where everyone's out to get you. The relentless attention of swarms of Mutants is like a bad dream. It's nail-biting stuff, but you hang on by your fingertips until, at every fifth level, the planet is restored and the Humanoids restocked.

The fact the odds appear to be stacked in your favour is one of the reasons Who Wants To Be A Millionaire works so well. *Defender* is equally tough but tolerant. The planet's not large – you can cover it in the blink of an eye. There are only ten Humanoids to protect. Your toy is by far the most powerful in the set – a sledgehammer of speed and firepower with a limited supply of Smart Bombs and, when you get really desperate, there's Hyperspace, another (risky) 'lifeline'.

Play doesn't rely on evolution of your toy by collecting temporary improvements. You are tooled-up from the outset, and only earn more chances to play by proving yourself in play.

So much has changed in the quarter of a century since *Defender* blew me away. But there's never been anything quite like it.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Duping the spoon

In the real world Methical, a 24-year-old from South Carolina, sold furniture. "It was well paying," he remembers, "but not as well paying as *EverQuest*." For Methical, buying and selling virtual furniture became more lucrative than real furniture could ever be.

It all started when, bored of the trade treadmill in *EverQuest 2* – making things was "a no-talent, button-mashing marathon," he remembers – he decided to take up furniture dealing with his virtual alter ego too. He found places on the 'dark side' of the game to buy desirable virtual furniture – a nice painting, a cool glass globe on iron legs, a stylish wine rack – for less than 50 silver. Then he sold them on to less worldly players, doubling his money. One afternoon, as he laid out his wares in his virtual showroom – selling a Gnomish chair at a slim profit – he closed a sell window and found he could still place the chair, even though it was for sale. He thought nothing of it, until he got a message from someone called JimBob: "This chair isn't as cool as I thought it was." Meth looked over: the chair he had placed after closing the sell window was still in his showroom. Meth started laughing: "The kind of laugh when you're a kid and you hit a house with an egg," he remembers. He sent a message to his guild: "I think I just duped something."

Virtual items are big business (earlier this year IGE, the largest independent virtual items broker, bought its closest competitor for a rumoured $10 million), so finding a 'dupe', a way of duplicating game items, is the equivalent of coming across a Royal Mint printing press. If he played his cards right, Meth realised, he could find himself sitting on a goldmine. With the help of his guild, he confirmed it wasn't just a fluke. Along with a friend (who Meth refers to only as 'Mr Pink'), they set up a production line, beginning with candelabras. After a day of candelabra trading, they had two platinum pieces – this at a time when even the hardest working *EQ* players were proud of a single PP, and virtual item trading sites sold platinum, one piece at a time, for $300. The next night the two duped, Meth says, 'until our eyes bled'. Bored of candelabras, they switched to high-end paintings, which went for five gold pieces each.

"It started to feel like Goodfellas," Meth recalls. "You know, that scene where all the mafia members are told to lay low and not spend any money. Then one guy shows up with a fur coat and a Cadillac." They bought all the most coveted virtual items, and discovered that the single most lucrative item was a pet, a Halasian Mauler dog. They started buying more copies of *EQ2*, running multiple copies across different servers all the better to dupe their dogs and spread the risk. They made two platinum pieces every few hours. On six servers, their level-five characters were the richest in the game. They had so much money they considered duping for fun: setting up a houseful of expensive baby dragons and giving them away. "We had about 20 or 30 baby dragons before we decided this plan made no sense," Meth says. "And, well, money is cool. I like money."

> "They made two platinum pieces every few hours. On six servers, their level-five characters were the richest in the game"

So they started to sell their virtual cash. They hit the auction sites, selling at 50 per cent of the market rate. Every day they expected Sony to fix the glitch, but three weeks later they were still selling – and flooring the market. Platinum prices dropped 60 per cent. They were scammed too: six times they were ripped off, for a total of about $5,000. Compared to what they were making, it was nothing. So much money began to accumulate in their accounts that Meth consulted a lawyer and an accountant to make sure they weren't risking prosecution. "Needless to say, neither of them had any idea what we were talking about," Meth says.

Ultimately, the dogs were their undoing. Anyone who strolled into Meth's showroom might see 24 of the most expensive dogs in the game ready to sell. They tried excuses: "It's a new tradeskill, dog breeding," or "I'm quitting *EQ2*. I figured this would be a fun way to blow my money." People started to complain about inflation. One morning, Meth logged on to find a patch message: "Merchants will no longer have any interest in purchasing your pets."

They knew the game was up. They tried to cover their tracks: they got rid of the dogs at a quarter of the usual price. What they couldn't sell, they destroyed. The next day their accounts were banned – Sony claimed to have tracked the duped money and taken it back, but never made contact with the dupers themselves, who still play *EQ2* today (Meth has nine unbanned accounts). Meth has had a few death threats, but he accepts that as part of living outside the virtual law: "We're kind of like these outlaws. I feel like Billy the Kid." And the money? Estimates put it around $70,000, but Meth remains evasive. "It's allowed me to go to both Hawaii and Paris now, as well as pay off student loans. Just know, it's more than some people make in a year. Hell, maybe three years."

So what lesson did they learn from bending the very rules of the virtual world itself? "There is no fucking spoon," Meth says.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



Illustration: tatoka



BIFFOVISION

Pretty vacant

I was born about seven years too late to get caught up in the punk movement. Circa 1977, the closest I got to anarchy was putting an elastic band in my teacher's coffee, and altering the Lord's Prayer during assembly (incidentally, "Our Father who arse in Devon, Billy be thy name" got me a morning outside Mrs Kemp's office to contemplate all the nice things God had ever done).

Talking of fictional deities, I've been playing Sony's *God Of War* recently. Beautifully balanced difficulty level; just enough longevity, without outstaying its welcome; sublime controls... As far as thirdperson hack 'em up adventures go it's everything you could ever want. Except for the fact it isn't even remotely original. Indeed, as much as I enjoy *God Of War*, it's somewhat indicative of the inspirational malaise that appears to have clamped itself to the very loins of this business.

Don't get me wrong: games have never been more polished. Cast your eyes across the landscape and you'll see Captain Quality striding across field and stream, flashing his eerily oiled thighs at girls and boys, young and old. But the Creativity Donkey is stumbling around its paddock, bleeding from the snout and anus, its braying reduced to a bleak rasp. How did the donkey end up in this state? Captain Quality beat him with a briefcase.

Games have become sterile and passionless. With precious few exceptions the rough edges have been filed off. Heck, even Japan seems to be playing things safe, with the likes of *Killer 7* now the exception rather than the rule. Everything is so achingly cautious, swaddled in corporate conservatism, that we've forgotten how punk the games industry used to be.

In the '80s anyone with a Spectrum, and a vague understanding of machine code, could become the next Bitmap Brothers or Matthew Smith. Alas, those youthful visionaries have either left the industry or become bloated and middle-aged, swallowed up by the apparatus of management. Or they're holed up on a farm with more sheep than is strictly healthy. Modern game development is an almighty juggernaut driven by a man in a suit, and any hint of a risky idea is crushed underneath.

Given that the individual voice has been replaced by a collective hive mind, the industry is not currently structured in a way that allows – or can afford – individualism. Character is being forced out (and by 'character' I don't mean identikit musclemen, anthropomorphised vermin or impractically busty adventuresses).

> Cast your eyes across the landscape and you'll see Captain Quality striding across field and stream, flashing his eerily oiled thighs

Alas, there's no sign of individuality coming to the fore in the first wave of Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 games. Once again, it's the graphics which get hyped up, rather than the game beneath the pretty pictures. Wouldn't it be joyous if, just for once, a new console was launched with the words "You're going to experience types of gameplay which we guarantee you will have never seen before", rather than the usual, tiresome "It's like being in movie!!!!" clichés? Unfortunately, while things remain set up as they are, that's never going to happen.

Oh, it's all well and good publishers stating that people don't buy games outside of the safe genres – the sport, the driving, the firstperson shoot 'em ups. But when that's all we're being offered to eat, what choice do we have?

The rest of the entertainment world appears to be faring much better. In broadcasting, technology is freeing up that punk ethic, rather than smothering it with a voluminous stomach. If you've ever seen the excellent Consolevania, or listened to a podcast, you'll know there's already a viable alternative to mainstream broadcast coverage of videogames – produced by people with enthusiasm and a screw-you attitude. People are beginning to create the sorts of broadcast entertainment they want to see.

"I have a great idea for a videogame – how do I go about getting it made?" is a query any game journalist will be familiar with. It's easy to dismiss, but how many 'great ideas' are being missed because it's virtually impossible to get them to the people that matter? You know: ideas by people who understand the potential of games, but who might not have the requisite computer programming degree?

While I fully appreciate that technology is at a level where it isn't practically feasible for the lone computer freak to create a title in his bedroom, it's essential that the industry finds a way to tap into that homebrew ethic. TV companies and film studios employ script readers to go through unsolicited submissions. They get thousands every day, but I guarantee you that every single script gets read. They know that new talent is their oxygen, and to let the next Russell T Davies or Paul Abbot slip through their fingers would be beyond disaster.

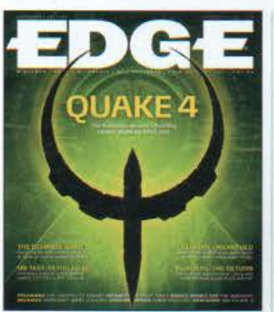
Talent is the lifeblood of any creative industry, and, at the risk of sounding macabre, the blood in the talent pool must be kept fresh. As it stands, the games industry pool is at risk of stagnating. Why, there's already pair of soiled underpants floating in it.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Illustration:

Inbox



Issue 154

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Nintendo Mobility
Just saw this on the Edge front page – Nintendo are offering official ringtones and wallpaper in Japan. Interesting, but there are no games at present, which is a shame – I really would like to see a mobile version of *Wario Ware*, complete with a global high score table. Maybe the DS would provide this – but *Wario* would sure be easier to play in boring work meetings.
Ravern

I fear that we're more likely to see the likes of the Game & Watch series. But you're right – what would suit mobile phone gaming's crappy control than something that needs only a couple of controls?
35899

Surely I can't be the only one that enjoyed using the phone in *Shenmue* to find out the next day's weather? Now that WAS fun. It should have been a game on its own...
Lerxst

I read with interest **Edge**'s coverage of the EIEF (**E154**), and of Adam Singer's address in particular.

At the risk of retreading thoroughly debated old ground, I'm moved to respond. Firstly, I think games are mainstream. While few know the significance of the number 1337, surely most in the west and the Far East could pick Pac-Man out of a line up. The iconography of games is already well established in the psyche of the developed world.

Putting that aside: arguing that games will never be mainstream until they have the power to make us cry is in my view totally spurious. I (very nearly) shed a tear at the end of *Half-Life 2*, if only because I realised that it was over. This is the point: games offer not a story, but an experience.

I (very nearly) shed a tear at the end of Half-Life 2, if only because I realised that it was over. This is the point: games offer not a story, but an experience

Games are not films. Until we can escape this dubious association, games probably never will achieve the mainstream success that Singer envisions. But that's OK. Games are not a storytelling medium. Sure, they can be, but that is not their function. Films and books tell stories, and cannot exist without them. Games simply offer an experience and I wonder where this curious association came from. A desire for validation? Such grasping only dilutes the form. It is of course a human instinct to understand the new by reference to the old, but games are no longer in their infancy.

Games are of two sorts: competitive (ie, against an opponent, virtual or otherwise) and simulation. They either offer a competition (a 'game', if you will) or a simulation, with some natural crossover. *Counter-Strike*, for example, has more in common with ice hockey than with the work of Tolstoy. To add a story would be utterly redundant. Simulations on the other hand, like the *Sim* titles, offer a readymade set of building blocks to play with. Either way, the game is an abstraction, a toyset, which requires no story, and no other justification to exist than to sell an immersive experience.

Emotional content is distinct from the melodramatic. As **Edge** rightly points out, current attempts to hammer 'emotional sophistication' into games is largely futile. This is because emotion in games does not come from dubious romantic subplots. Moreover, it comes from the experience of playing.

When I fear for the lost souls of the Darwinians, it's not because I'm afraid that boy won't meet girl. It's because the experience tells me that they are in danger, and that they are my responsibility. It is this immersion to which we should look for the holy grail of Singer's 'emotional content'.
Peter Vine

It's certainly true that games are too often aligned with movies, chiefly because they're obviously such visually driven mediums, and, yes, it may well be holding back their development. More importantly, perhaps, we'd contest the claim that games are no longer in their infancy, not only because so much of their content is, if not infantile, then adolescent. Some efforts are trying harder, though...

Last issue's Internet Game Of the Month, *Facade*, was a game which opened up a new scope for gaming, to my mind, at least. It represents a new genre. I played it and felt like I was part of a soap opera, with a couple going through a rough patch, then over what's likely to be a cliff; I can talk to them – and haven't yet saved their marriage. *Facade* and its characters have a much darker and serious tone than anything else I've experienced while gaming and it isn't an action, science-fiction or fantasy game, it's a serious drama you can interact with emotionally.

Although the voice acting is excellent, the characters – with their childhood problems – are engaging, and the dark jazz music is great for immersion into this horrible drama, the characters aren't always able to respond correctly to some of your text inputs. But, still, I can see the ambitions it has for the characters to become more responsive, the scene to extend to more than one room, the graphics to become more aesthetically refined and to, overall, widen the player's ability to manipulate others. Imagine all the lives you could mess up.

Another important point is that this genre, if it were to become more advanced, could be the first in gaming to be seriously accepted as 'art'. The scope of giving the player the experience to explore the emotional geography of other characters and dictate their lives is limited only by character development and memory, I suppose. It would represent a whole new challenge for narrators.
Harold Bartlett

The next step is for something as inventive as *Facade* to become a true commercial proposition. First, we'll have to see how well *Fahrenheit* fares in the sales charts.

In response to LJH's letter (**E**153), which stated that 'the gaming majority will form their decision to buy one machine over another based largely on specs', I would say he/she is living in a fantasy world.

For the sake of the argument given, it's probably easier to split the gamers cited into the two traditional groups – 'hardcore' and 'softcore'. Yes, some of the hardcore might take serious note of these specs. Indeed, they fill internet forums and letters pages across the spectrum for months before said machines actually hit the shelves. But this is where their influence stops. Some of those looking to be ahead of the game may wait for a PlayStation 3 instead of purchasing a 360 purely because of teraflops, etc, but the majority of hardcore gamers are more likely to plump for one or the other (or indeed both) based on which of their beloved franchises is due to appear on the consoles in question.

I've yet to see anyone, on any forum, say that they're definitely avoiding the 360 because of the number of polys it can or can't handle.

Secondly, when it comes to the softcore (probably the most important market for the industry nowadays, due to their sheer size and spending power), the situation is completely different. While playgrounds may be littered with "Xbox is more powerful than PS2" talk, it's hardly hurt Sony's sales, has it?

The large majority of specs will go over the softcore's head. Having conducted academic research into the success of PlayStation, I can say that a combination of marketable titles and brand awareness determines where the softcore's money goes.

The problem that dedicated gamers have these days is understanding why they aren't the centre of the publisher's universe any more – a comprehension of the differences between *us* and *them*. The large majority of people out there don't base their purchasing decisions on specs listed in **Edge** or any other



Fancy a game of *Conker: Live & Reloaded* over Xbox Live? A certain FPS may be eating into the experience, reckons forum contributor Lee

magazine. Any 'hype' surrounding specs is more for the benefit of journalists and the industry itself than it is the buying public.

Sadly, the latter are currently all too easily swayed by whether or not they can add a spoiler to the back. Still, we can't have everything can we?
Keith Andrew

True, specs on paper may not matter so much to the massmarket, but hasn't, say, the PSP's patently beautiful screen alone been responsible for it being purchased at such speed in the UK, and by people who may not have looked twice at Nintendo's DS? Surely when the technological superiority becomes so tangible, the rules change.

Perhaps we don't need such a crass system as 'win or lose', but players still need an indication of how they are progressing, otherwise enjoyment is removed

To revisit David Fowkes' correspondence: David, take a game like *Grand Theft Auto III* or *Doom III* (or even the original) back only 20 years. It would be fairly safe to assume that the games would provoke much the same reaction you spoke of in your original letter, regarding the realism of games for next-generation consoles.

Last night I watched Aliens: The Director's Cut on Channel 4. Take that movie back 40 years and observe the public reaction. It would be safe to assume it would receive a similar response from the general public about what can or should be considered entertainment. Even films made during that time were controversial – take Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange (1971), a very 'tame' film by today's standards.

More observant **Edge** readers have probably cast a cursory glance over the lead article of a recent edition of The Economist (August 6 – 'Breeding Evil? The real impact of videogames'). The piece describes how scepticism of new media is not a new thing, discussing Socrates' objections to written text – his reasoning being that the loss of oral tradition would adversely impact people's capacity to remember (because everything is written down).

It's all relative.

Your argument suggests that several thousand years ago you would have advocated that we licensed books in an effort to reduce forgetfulness in society. Are forgetful people in the modern age that way because we have learned to write things down? No these people are just forgetful, whether we have the written word or not. Similarly, some people always have been and always will be violent, whether we have videogames (however realistic) or not.

What you suggested by licensing high-powered videogame consoles is censorship and an attempt to stifle technological progress.
Callum Hibbert

F

Topic: Halo 2 and the demise of Xbox Live

Since the release of *Halo 2* Xbox Live has been on a downturn. Every new Xbox Live-compatible game gets shunned after its first few days on the shelf – load up a copy of *Conker: Live & Reloaded* or *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* and there's nowhere near as many people online as you'd expect there to be. *Halo 2* has affected new releases, and they are completely unable to hold up against it. Yeah, you can try and organise something with your friends, but that isn't always possible, and you may not even find enough people with the game. Back before release, there were plenty of people playing all sorts of games. *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* remained fairly busy, and even *Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow* was easy to get a game in.

***Halo 2* isn't a bad game by any standards, and its quality isn't the point of the discussion. The thing is, if I don't want to play *Halo 2* online, my hopes of getting a decent game going on something else are completely buggered. Has it become too big for Xbox Live's own good?**
Lee

The thing that bugs me about *Halo 2* and Live is that the game's sold over six million, and yet there are only around two million Xbox Live subscribers. That means more than 60 per cent of its userbase aren't playing online. So how many are really playing the multiplayer – which I think everyone would agree is what the game is balanced around? I still reckon for the bulk of people it's a singleplayer game. Which is pretty amazing considering it's the standout online title on the console with the most progressive online service. It's partly why I'm still not convinced competitive online play has a serious mainstream future.
Dorgathen

In **E**154's 'Building the Perfect Game' article you claimed that one component, the structure, would present no 'concrete win or loss', and that 'it will never be clear to players how far they have reached in the game'. While the technology is most certainly available to create games such as this, I wonder if it is a beneficial direction for the majority to follow?

Strategy titles are obvious contenders for such an open-ended structure, yet there still needs to be set parameters within the game. Perhaps not such a crass system as 'win or lose', but players still need an indication of how they are progressing, or else the element of enjoyment is removed. Without such guidelines the player would be unable to accurately chart their progress, and therefore the game takes on a portrayal of life as we know it, without instant rewards and appraisal.

I am not suggesting that every game needs to have a giant sign flashing 'Well

Continued

done!' every time you solve a puzzle or complete the most mundane of tasks, but I would feel incessantly frustrated by a game that seemed to offer no obvious rewards. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is heralded for being a game that offers such a wide range of activities, but at the heart is a plot-driven narrative that the player has to complete in order to progress.

This next statement will put me firmly in the minority, but I gained more satisfaction from the short lived *Lego Star Wars* than I have ever done in any session of *GTA*. While one game possesses a very linear storyline, and the other a whole city to explore, I find the Traveller's Tales title to be infinitely more enjoyable, as it is clearly apparent what needs to be done, what is left to collect, and basically how well you are doing. I may be an old-fashioned style of gamer, but I'd much rather rescue a princess from a castle and know I've completed the game, than worry about the plethora of miniscule details and storylines I may have missed.

Craig Williams

The Perfect Game is currently being debated on **Edge**'s forum, and includes an accusation that the article had been written 'in the hope some developer will notice it and say "Wow! Lets hire this fellow!"', something we laughed at long and hard. Feel free to join in (but beware comments like the above).



Topic: Mobile phone gaming
Recently I've really started to get into mobile games, given that the arrival of my new K750i means that it can cope with 'premium' games and can store a lot of them. I've downloaded £30 worth over the last couple of months, and found that for three quid or so, I really don't care if the game is rubbish. Particularly as there are virtually no reviews or anywhere to find out whether they're decent before buying them. None of them are any greater than something you'd find on the GBA, but nonetheless for this money they're a good punt.
I've also noticed that because these games are on my phone, and it's difficult to see the screen from a side angle, I don't feel self-consciously like I'm 'gaming' in the same way that I would if I pulled out a PSP or similar.
Jahbulon

Gaming has come full circle in my home. Fast approaching 30, I've been playing videogames all my life. However, in recent years my interest in gaming has diminished as other things like work and home commitments, the gym, and other interests take up more of my time. I was even considering selling my gaming and **Edge** collection (the latter being complete and something I'm very proud of) to make more room for dull office-type stuff.

Then the PSP got its European release on September 1, and it was just like 1995 all over again. I honestly didn't think I'd buy a PSP, and I don't know what drew me to the shop on the day of release (probably that delicious screen). Ten years on, however, a brand new Sony console complete with *Ridge Racer* is being played hours on end and I can't leave the machine alone!

Well, I'd like to write more but that little sexy thing is calling me back and...

Dr Richard Evans

So the DS didn't pique your interest? We must question the validity of your owning-every-issue-of-**Edge** claim.

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address:
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Crashlander™

BY JAMES HUTCHINSON

DOOM AND MORTAL KOMBAT ARE ALL WELL AND GOOD. BUT I WANT A VIDEOGAME MOVIE THAT'S A LITTLE MORE CEREBRAL.

THAT'S WHY I WAS THE 'FIRST PERSON' TO RENT OUT THIS LITTLE BEAUTY.

NOW LET'S SIT BACK AND ENJOY THE RIDE.

10 ADD MORE BROWN.

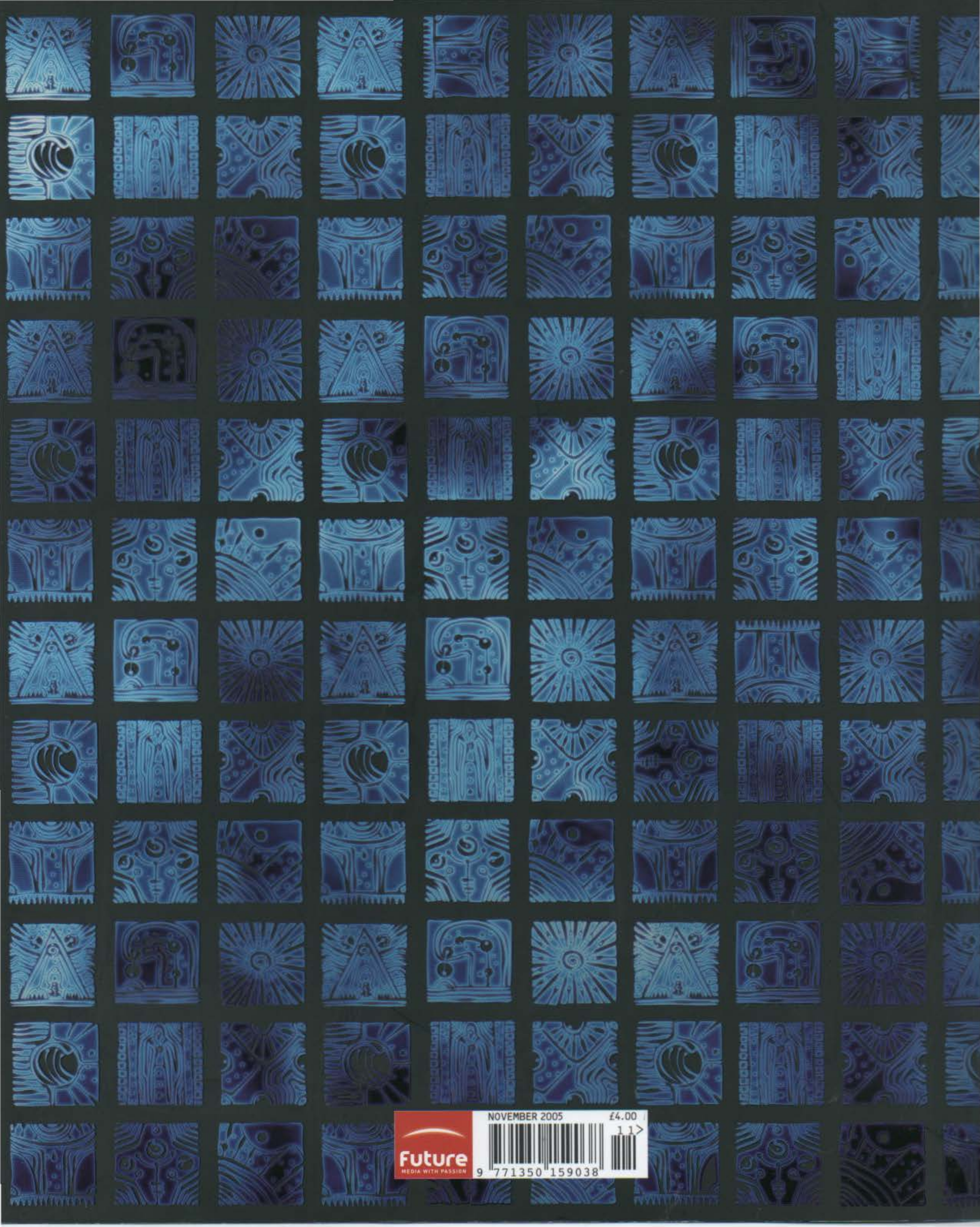
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